

The Triumph of Dionysos in Constantinople

A Late Fifth-Century Mosaic in Context

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In 1995, during the construction of an apartment block in the Samatya district (formerly Psamatia) of Istanbul, the blade of a bulldozer struck a mosaic floor. By the time the local authorities were informed, it had been mostly destroyed by the foundation cut. The archaeologists of the Istanbul Archaeological Museum lifted what remained and subsequently carried out a necessarily brief rescue excavation.¹ Soon after, a new building rose at the site. Following standard procedures, the mosaic was divided in sections for lifting and transferred to the Istanbul Central Conservation and Restoration Laboratories, where it is currently being stored, to await conservation.² The photos included here were taken before the lifting of the mosaic.

The mosaic depicts a triumphant Dionysos surrounded by a *thiasos*, his ecstatic retinue (fig. 1). Its size, innovative iconography and composition, and vibrant figure style make the Psamatia mosaic one of the most spectacular representations of Dionysos on a mosaic floor to survive from late antiquity. The mosaic is an important addition to the growing body of archaeological evidence for the use of classical themes in the late antique and early Byzantine period. It is also among the few securely provenanced works of art from late antique

Constantinople and thus an important piece of evidence for a period of the city's history about which we know a great deal from written sources but from which precious little material evidence remains.

Owing to difficulties of access, the mosaic has been signaled occasionally but has remained essentially unpublished.³ This comprehensive study is based on my firsthand examination of the mosaic, on archaeological finds from the site, and on archival information, including the excavation report. In the first part, I present a description and reconstruction of the mosaic,

3 M.-H. Gates, "Archaeology in Turkey," *AJA* 100, no. 2 (1996): 330–31; İ. M. Tunay, "Byzantine Archaeological Findings in Istanbul during the Last Decade," in *Byzantine Constantinople: Monuments, Topography, and Everyday Life*, ed. N. Necipoğlu (Leiden, 2001), 229, suggested a date ranging from the fourth to the late fifth century; T. F. Mathews, *Byzantium: From Antiquity to the Renaissance* (New York, 1998), 76, proposed a late fifth-century date; A. Yalçın Bilban in *Archeo* 14, no. 166 (1998): 41, dated the mosaic to the fourth or beginning of the fifth century; D. Parrish, "Genre Imagery in a Few Late Roman and Early Byzantine Pavements from Constantinople-Istanbul: Local Counterparts to the Great Palace Mosaic," in *IV. Uluslararası Türkiye Mozaik Korpusu Sempozyum Bildirileri "Geçmişten Günümüze Mozaik Köprüsü"* = *The Proceedings of IV. International Mosaic Corpus of Turkey* (Bursa, 2008), 94–99, also suggested a fourth- or fifth-century date; P. Asimakopoulou-Atzaka, "Τα ψηφιδωτά δάπεδα της Κωνσταντινούπολης και της Θεσσαλονίκης κατά την Ύστερη Αρχαιότητα: Ομοιότητες και διαφορές," *Byzantina* 27 (2007): 305–51, dated the mosaic to the mid-fifth century. The first comprehensive study of the Psamatia mosaic is in Ö. Dalgıç, "Late Antique Floor Mosaics of Constantinople Prior to the Great Palace" (PhD diss., Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, 2008), 86–118, figs. 83–93.

1 The site is on a block between Çamçak and Pulcu Streets. It corresponds to 322 pafta, 2385 ada, 222 parsel in the Turkish cadastral system.

2 The pieces were positioned face down so that mortar could be cleaned from the backs and that is how they are currently being stored.



FIG. 1

The Dionysos mosaic found in the Samatya (formerly Psamatia) district of Istanbul, looking west (photo courtesy of Albrecht Berger)

and discuss its dating, its location in relation to the urban topography of late antique Constantinople, and its architectural context. The second and third parts explore the mosaic's idiosyncratic iconography, composition, and figure style, and their possible meaning and function in the context of late antique culture. I propose that the Psamatia mosaic belonged to a suburban villa in a neighborhood occupied by the estates of the Christian elite and that the triumphant Dionysos and his cortege, which took up the entire floor of the dining hall, symbolized the merriment and unbridled joy brought to people by the god of wine and theater. I establish links between the mosaic and the changing cultures of late antique dining and entertainment, which included increasingly elaborate performances with musicians, dance, and drama, and suggest that the mosaic itself represented a festive reenactment of a Dionysiac procession, perhaps inspired by a theatrical performance. Finally, I explore how the mosaic might have functioned, perhaps humorously, in the increasingly Christianized context of late antique Constantinople.

The Psamatia Mosaic in an Archeological Context

The Excavation

The mosaic was unearthed during the building of foundations in a lot in Samatya, a residential neighborhood in the Kocamustafapaşa district of Istanbul. The lot is situated between Pulcu (west) and Çamçak (east) streets, which run parallel at one point, and flanked by apartment blocks to the north and south. The foundation work must have started in the south and moved north since it tore off whatever was to the south of the surviving floor. The mosaic lay approximately four meters below street level. By the time the Istanbul Archaeological Museum was informed of the construction, the site was almost completely demolished except for a long, narrow strip of the mosaic.



FIG. 2
West end of Dionysos
mosaic, looking west
(photo courtesy of
Istanbul Archaeological
Museum)

The ensuing salvage excavation revealed a few architectural features of the mosaic-paved space.⁴ One was a wall fragment made of cut stone and faced with two layers of plaster (fig. 2). The extant portion of the wall was approximately a meter long and had an east-west entrance into the mosaic-paved space at its north end. The north face of the wall had a clean finish; its south end was completely destroyed. The width of the wall on the mosaic-facing side and its height from the mosaic floor are both approximately one meter. However, the wall continued two meters below the mosaic floor; it apparently belonged to the northeastern corner of an earlier building and was reused in the mosaic-paved building's west wall. A large threshold block and a fragment of a semicircular window pediment were found collapsed just to the north side of the wall and in front of the west end of the mosaic, just in front of the west entrance. Large blocks of mortared

brick faced with stone lay directly on the mosaic floor, suggesting that a vault, probably domed, covered the mosaic-paved structure.⁵ The bricks bore stamps, and some were taken to the museum.

An intriguing find revealed by the same foundation cut was a marble sarcophagus and four lids, which were moved from their original location and placed toward the west end of the mosaic floor, right by the wall fragment. Unfortunately, we do not know the original location or the stratigraphy. The archaeologist who conducted the rescue excavation noted that the mosaic floor rested on a filled-in ground, which he did not have the opportunity to investigate further. This, the reused wall fragment, and the sarcophagus indicate that there was an earlier layer, possibly a burial site, below the mosaic-paved structure.⁶

4 The archaeological data presented here are based on a brief rescue excavation report by Necati Erek and Rahmi Asal in the archives of the Istanbul Archaeological Museum, file no. 720/121365.

5 The archaeologists came to this conclusion based on the shape of the fallen pieces of mortared brick.

6 The sarcophagus, which most likely belongs to that layer, is white marble and has no ornamentation.



FIG. 3 Reconstruction of Dionysos mosaic by author and Ekin Dirik



FIG. 4 Dionysos mosaic, detail (photo courtesy of Istanbul Archaeological Museum)

The Mosaic

The surviving strip of the mosaic floor measures 2.5 by 10 meters. Only the west end is extant; it is outlined by the reused wall fragment. The east and south sides have been lost. The northern part of the mosaic extended underneath the foundations of the neighboring apartment building.

In the mosaic's original configuration a large square panel would have occupied most of the floor. With the missing southern half, the square panel would have measured 8 by 8 meters (fig. 3). The margins of the pavement survive only along the east (1.2 meters) and west (1.8 meters) sides; these are decorated with a motif of "tangent and intersecting circles forming flowers" (R238f).⁷ In the northeast corner of the extant floor,

a small corner fragment—a double black fillet bordering a white field—survives. This indicates that a second panel, smaller in size, lay to the east of the main panel. Assuming it was symmetrical, this second panel would have measured 3 meters wide and the entire floor at least 8 by 11 meters, although the floor clearly extended farther to the east and perhaps to the north and south as well (fig. 3).

The mosaic is made of baked clay, natural stone, and marble tesserae; I observed no glass. The colors include shades of green, yellow, pink, red, brown, black, and white. The average tesserae counts are 100 per square decimeter for the background, 120 per square decimeter in the body of Dionysos at the center of the mosaic, and 185 per square decimeter in the face of a personification of winter in the northwest corner of the framing square.

The square frame of the main panel (1.25 meters wide) is comprised of a pair of undulating interlaced

⁷ The *R* numbers refer to the two volumes of C. Balmelle et al., *Le décor géométrique de la mosaïque romaine: Répertoire graphique et descriptif des compositions linéaires et isotropes* (Paris, 2002).

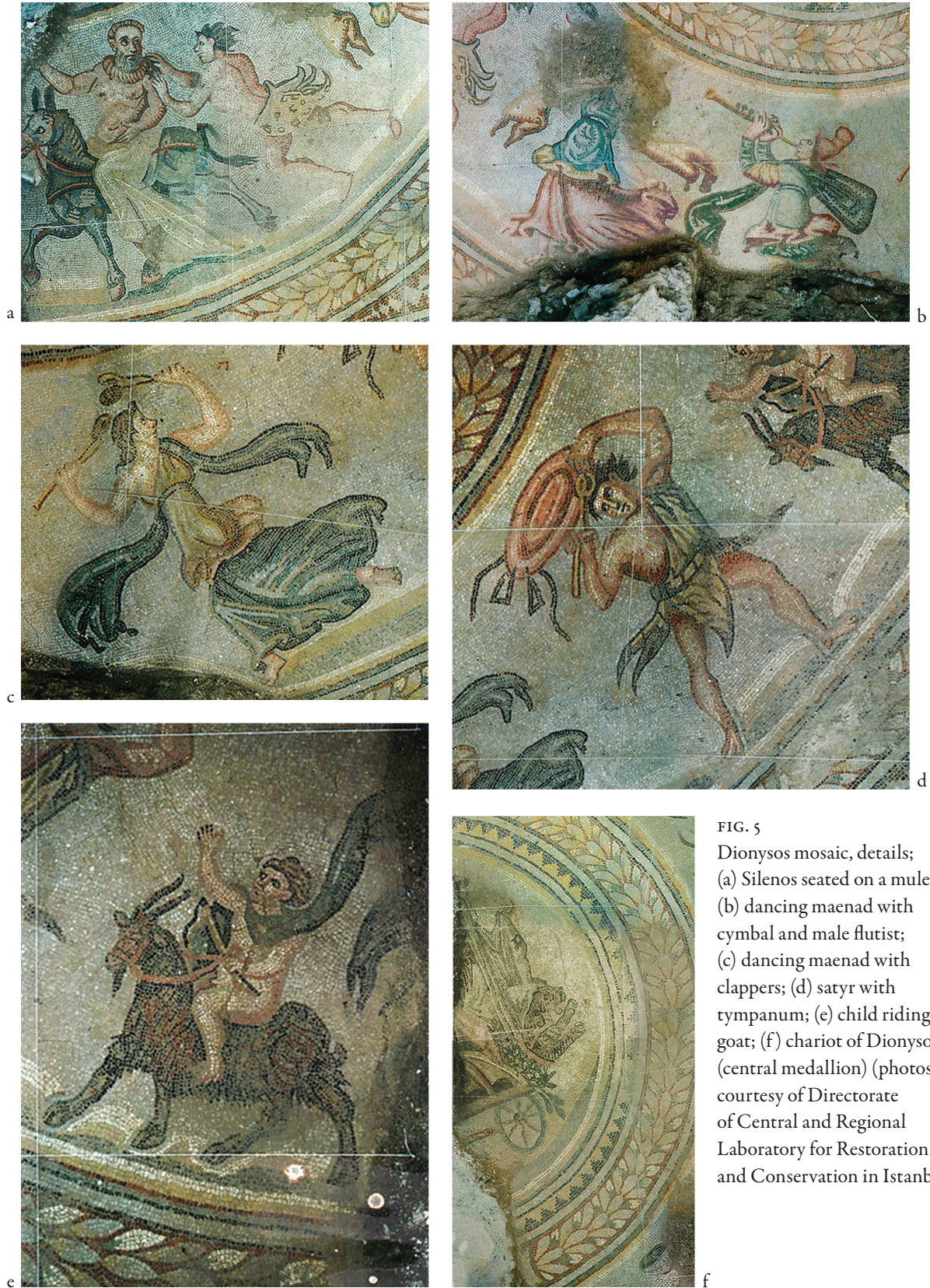


FIG. 5
Dionysos mosaic, details;
(a) Silenos seated on a mule;
(b) dancing maenad with
cymbal and male flutist;
(c) dancing maenad with
clappers; (d) satyr with
tympanum; (e) child riding a
goat; (f) chariot of Dionysos
(central medallion) (photos
courtesy of Directorate
of Central and Regional
Laboratory for Restoration
and Conservation in Istanbul)

bands (similar to R68d); one is rainbow-shaded and the other is a guilloche. Eyelets occupy the center of each interlace and some contain small crosses (figs. 1 and 3). The square frame surrounded two concentric circles, each defined by a laurel wreath (R89d); a band of serrated sawtooth (R10g); and simple white, yellow, and green fillets (figs. 1–5). The diameter of the outer circle is 5.5 meters. The over life-size bust of the personification of winter is situated between the outer circle and the square frame, and we can safely assume that the other three corners contained personifications of the remaining seasons. Winter is depicted in three-quarter view and dressed for cold weather in a green cloak that covers her head and shoulders (fig. 4). She holds before her a mantle containing two gourds and two wild ducks, typical attributes of winter in late Roman mosaics.⁸

In the space between the two circular frames, the thiasos moves clockwise around a triumphant Dionysos in the center. An undulating band represents the ground line above which the three-quarter life-size figures float in a neutral background. Looking from the east and starting from six o'clock, the first surviving member of the thiasos is Silenos, seated on a mule (fig. 5a). He is shown as an older man with a broad forehead and bushy beard and he is clearly intoxicated; a young satyr supports his left shoulder from behind, a well-known motif in thiasos scenes. To the right of these figures is a dancing maenad, whose damaged right hand holds what appears to be a cymbal or wine cup, followed by a male flutist (fig. 5b); another dancing maenad holding clappers (fig. 5c); a second satyr playing a tympanum with a stick (fig. 5d); and, finally, a child riding a goat (fig. 5e). The child, naked except for a green mantle that swirls in an arch over and behind his head, holds the goat's reins and a whip in his left hand and balances himself by raising his right hand. This is a familiar figure from a well-known episode in Dionysos's childhood in which he learns how to ride the animal.

The missing half of the thiasos probably contained seven more figures. These likely included one or two of the nymphs who often attend the child Dionysos as he learns to ride, as, for example, in a scene from the god's

life on a large mosaic at Sepphoris (third century).⁹ Pan is commonly a member of the thiasos and would have been included, and the flute player, an unexpected participant, may have been accompanied by other musicians.¹⁰

Most of the central medallion is lost except for an eight-spoked wheel and a curved car overflowing with garlands (fig. 5f). These belonged to Dionysos's chariot. Behind the remnants of the chariot are visible the head, forelegs, and upper torso of a panther striding toward the right; around the beast's head is a red strap with which it must have been harnessed to the chariot; it is safe to assume there was a second panther since in all other representations of the subject the felines harnessed to the car are paired. Certain details such as the direction in which the chariot is moving and the number of its occupants are unclear. The remains of Dionysos include a raised arm and a shoulder, probably the left, and part of a long white mantle; he would have appeared either accompanied by the personification of Victory or his consort Ariadne, or by himself, sitting or standing, and holding the reins in one hand. The position of the chariot's extant wheel and the axle suggest it was not depicted from the side. The curved box indicates it faced forward, while the position of the panther suggests it may have been depicted from behind, as if moving away.

Dating

The only datable evidence from the salvage excavation is the stamped bricks from the ceiling blocks found on the mosaic floor; seven of these are now in the Istanbul Archaeological Museum. Based on the chronology established by Jonathan Bardill, I can date three of them, one precisely to 468–69 and the other two more broadly to the fifth century.¹¹ Although it is possible that the dome and the floor represent different phases of the structure, stylistic comparisons also support a fifth-century date for the mosaic. The dynamic poses of the dancing figures in the Dionysiac procession find

8 For other examples, see G. Åkerström-Hougen, *The Calendar and Hunting Mosaics of the Villa of the Falconer in Argos: A Study in Early Byzantine Iconography* (Stockholm, 1974), 120–30, figs. 75–83, pls. X–XI.

9 R. Talgam and Z. Weiss, *The Mosaics of the House of Dionysos at Sepphoris* (Jerusalem, 2004), IV–A and X–A.

10 Maenads and satyrs who make their own music and dance to it are more common. The only other instance in which an outside musician takes part in the thiasos is the Antioch triumph. See D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* (Princeton, 1947), 92–104, pl. XVIc.

11 J. Bardill, *Brickstamps of Constantinople* (New York, 2004). The IAM Inventory Numbers for the stamped bricks are 95.5, 95.8, 95.9. For the dating of the brickstamps see Dalgıç, “Mosaics of Constantinople,” 93–96 and 193–98.

their closest parallel in contemporary luxury objects; especially noteworthy is the fifth-century silver ewer from the Sevso treasure decorated with a Dionysiac thiasos (fig. 6).¹² Among floor mosaics, the best analogies for the style and iconography of the Psamatia mosaic are thiasoi scenes in Sarrin, in northern Syria (end of the fifth–mid-sixth century); in Argos, in southern Greece (sixth century); and a scene of the triumph of Dionysos in Sheikh Zouéde in Northern Sinai (fifth or sixth century) (figs. 7–9).¹³ These comparisons are addressed more fully below.

12 For the Sevso ewer, see M. M. Mango, “Der Seuso Schatzfund: Ein Ensemble westlichen und östlichen Kunstschaffens,” *Antike Welt* 21 (1990): 80–81, fig. 13. It has been argued that a mosaic must be considered in the context of the development of floor mosaics and that stylistic parallels with works in other media have no validity; see G. Helenkemper Salies, “Die Datierung der Mosaiken im grossen Palast zu Konstantinopel,” *BJ* 187 (1987): 273–306. See also K. M. D. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World* (Cambridge and New York, 1999), 234. However, there are close formal and stylistic parallels between the ewer and the mosaic. The tambourine-playing satyr in the Psamatia mosaic is almost identical to the satyr in the Sevso ewer, except for their attributes and the grotesque face of the satyr in the ewer. Both are depicted frontally and grounded firmly on their strong and wide-open legs. They have identical body types and costumes: a well-built athletic body is covered only with a short *nebris* attached on one shoulder and belted around the waist. The maenads in both representations jump forward on the right foot while the right leg is bent and the foot is still in the air; the arms are raised above the head. The hairstyles, clothing, and the fluttering of the capes in the air are similar. Old Silenos is depicted with the same physiognomy and attire in both and in the mosaic he is attended by a young satyr, who gestures just like the maenad attending the child on a goat on the ewer. The typology of the maenad in full profile view playing the double flute is identical to the male musician in the mosaic, though the details of the individual figures are different. Also, in the ewer there is no central medallion and the god is part of the thiasos zone that runs around the body of the vessel and the wreath outlines the various figural zones, as in the mosaic. In the ewer, a pair of panthers, just above the thiasos zone and loping from the body of the ewer toward its mouth, forms the handles. One of the panthers is harnessed, not to a chariot, but to the spigot of the ewer. The visual parallel between the vertical structure and the three dimensionality of the composition in the ewer and the flat, two dimensionality of the mosaic floor where the panthers are placed in the center is noteworthy.

13 For the Argos thiasos, see Åkerström-Hougen, *Calendar and Hunting Mosaics*; for the Sarrin thiasos, see J. Balty, *La mosaïque de Sarrin: Osrhoene* (Paris, 1990). For the Sinai triumph of Dionysos, see A. Ovadih, C. G. de Silva, and S. Mucznik, “The Mosaic Pavements of Sheikh Zouéde in Northern Sinai,” in *Tesserae: Festschrift J. Engemann* (Münster, 1991), 181–91. Ovadih dates the mosaic to the mid-fourth to mid-fifth century. Dunbabin believes this date is too early and suggests the fifth or sixth century; “Domestic Dionysus?”



FIG. 6 Silver ewer with Dionysiac thiasos scene from the Sevso Treasure (photo courtesy of the Trustees of the Marquess of Northampton 1987 Settlement)

The repertoire of the geometric ornaments is generally consistent with that of other Constantinople mosaics. For example, the tangent and intersecting circles at the margins appear in the Vilayet mosaic, which dates to the middle of the fifth century (fig. 10).¹⁴ Although it is a very common motif, the variation in Psamatia is almost identical to that in Vilayet, where the same color combination and arrangement create a

Telete in Mosaics from Zeugma and the Late Roman Near East,” *JRA* 21 (2008): 207.

14 For the Vilayet mosaic, see R. M. Harrison and G. R. J. Lawson, “The Mosaics in Front of the Vilayet Building in Istanbul,” *Istanbul Arkeoloji Müzeleri Yıllığı* 13–14 (1966): 216–18.

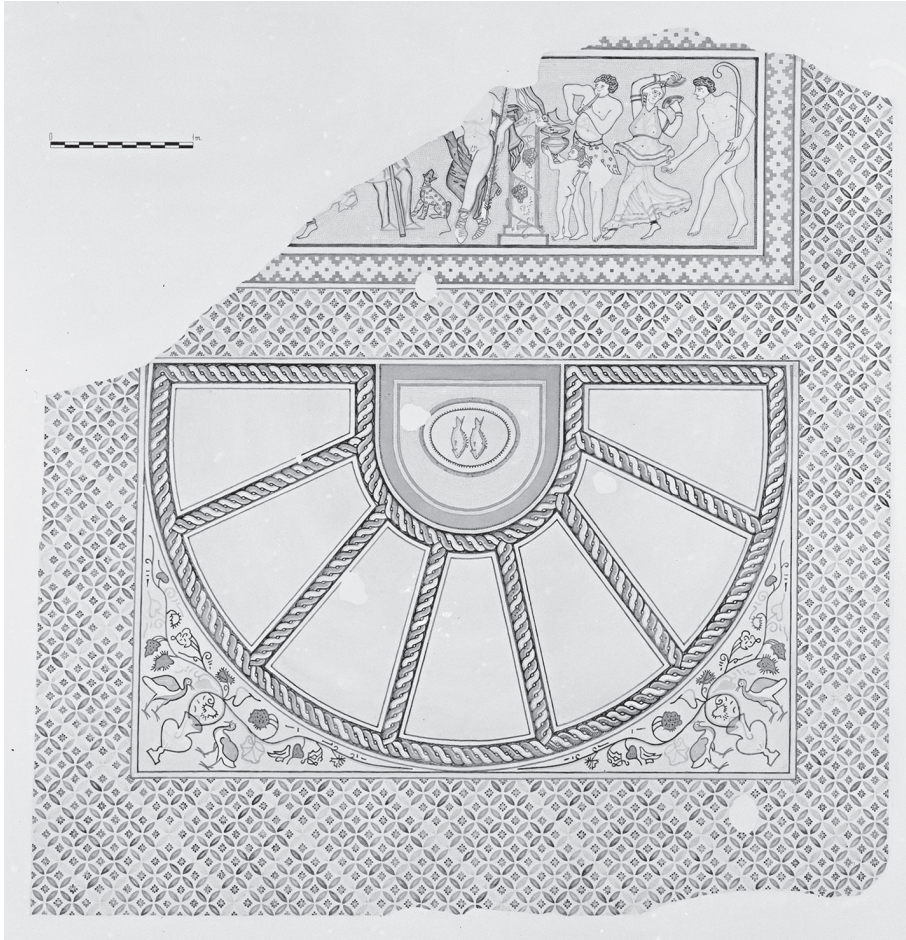


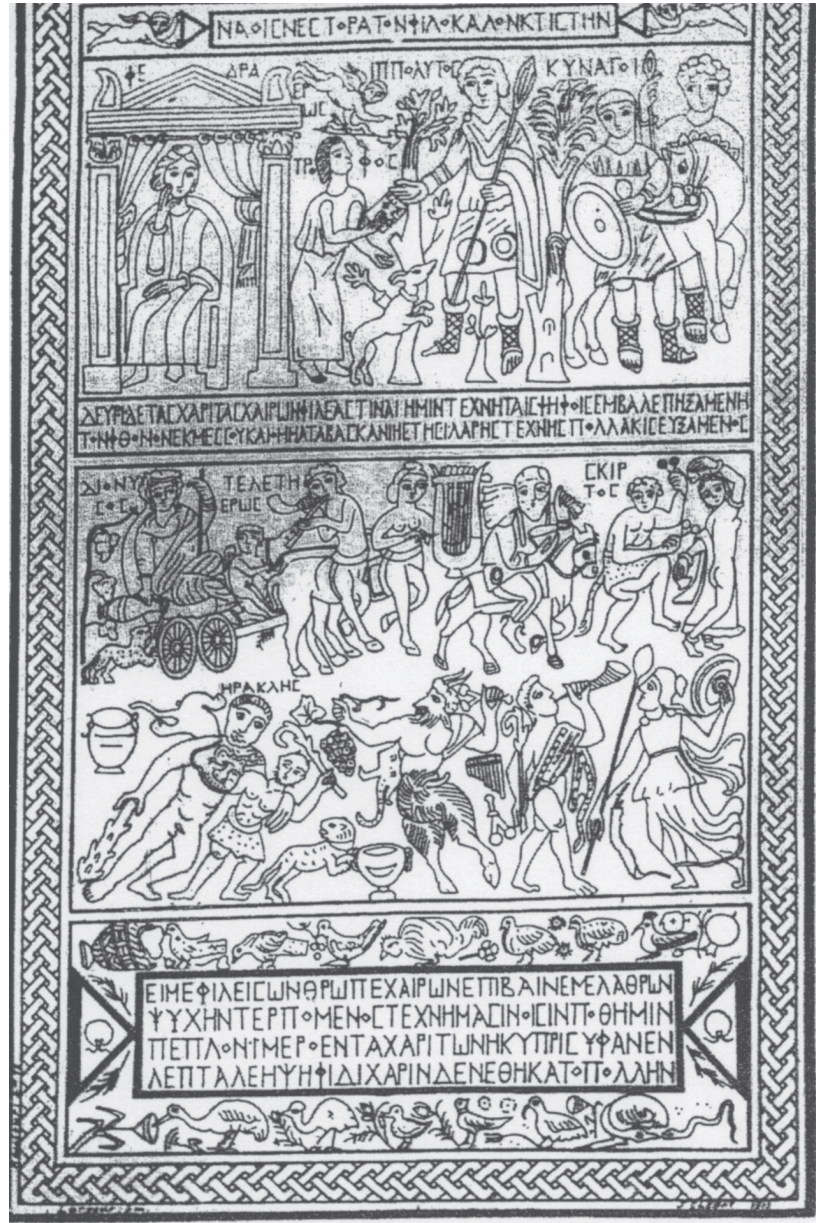
FIG. 7
Dionysos mosaic,
Villa of the
Falconer, Argos,
Greece (drawing
by K. Tousloukof,
courtesy of French
School in Athens)



FIG. 8 Dionysos mosaic, Sarrin (Osrhoene), Syria (drawing courtesy of Janine Balty)

FIG. 9

The myth of Phaedra and Hippolytos and a Dionysiac procession from the Sheikh Zouède mosaic in Northern Sinai, Egypt (drawing after J. Clédat, “Fouilles à Cheikh Zouède,” *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte* 15 [1915]: 15–48, fig. 5)



trompe l’oeil effect of diagonal lines of concave squares (as in R239e). Only the filling motifs in the centers of the circles are different: Psamatia has florets (R238f) and Vilayet has concave squares (similar to R238a–b). The pair of undulating interlaced bands, with slight variations, is seen in the mosaics from Saraçhane (City Hall) in Istanbul (mid-fourth to mid-fifth century) and at Kyzikos, near Istanbul (fifth century) (fig. 11).¹⁵

15 For the Saraçhane mosaic, see Dalgıç, “Mosaics of Constantinople,” 25–28. For dating suggestions, see G. Helenkemper-Salies,

“Konstantinopel,” in *RBK*, 4:617. The Kyzikos version has two rainbow shaded bands; S. Başaran, A. Yaylalı, and V. Özkaya, “Kyzikos 1992 Kazı Çalışmaları,” *XV. Kazı Sonuçları Toplantısı* 2 (1993): 547, fig. 16. A few examples are known in Thessalonike, all dated to the mid-fifth century; Asimakopoulou-Atzaka, “Τα ψηφιδωτά δάπεδα,” 31. For examples in the Aegean islands ranging in date from the fifth to seventh century, see S. Pelekanidis and P. Atzaka, *Σύνταγμα τῶν παλαιοχριστιανικῶν ψηφιδωτῶν δαπέδων τῆς Ἑλλάδος*, vol. 1, *Νησιωτικὴ Ἑλλάς* (Thessalonike, 1974), 47, no. 4, fig. 6a–b; 69, no. 28, fig. 35b; 78, no. 42, fig. 47b; 117, no. 97, fig. 90a; 136, no. 126, fig. 116a; 137, no. 128, fig. 119. In the eastern Mediterranean, however, the motif appears much earlier, for example in the

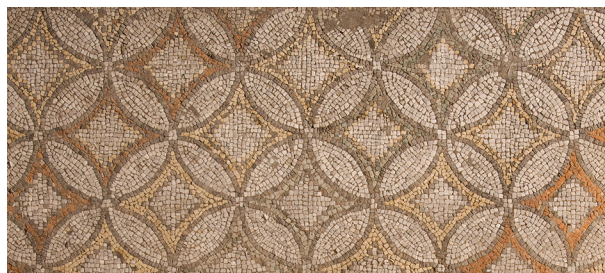


FIG. 10 Vilayet mosaic (detail), Istanbul (photo by author)



FIG. 11 Saraçhane mosaics (detail), Istanbul (photo by author)

The Psamatia version has one rainbow shaded band and one guilloche. The Saraçhane version has one rainbow-shaded band and one band of ribbon twist and the eyelets are plain. A variation of this motif, with circles alternating in size, is more common in western Asia Minor and can be found, for example, in a mosaic in the villa at Pactolus Cliff at Sardis (mid-fifth century).¹⁶ There the motif appears in combination with a sawtooth band, as it does in the Psamatia mosaic. Laurel wreaths appear both in the Vilayet and the Saraçhane mosaics.¹⁷

basilica at Chrysopolitissa (fourth century) and in the House of Aion (second quarter of the fourth century), both in Nea Paphos; see D. Michaelides, *Cypriot Mosaics* (Nicosia, 1987), 34–35, fig. 37; W. A. Daszewski and D. Michaelides, *Mosaic Floors in Cyprus* (Ravenna, 1988), 56–70, figs. 26–27. Another early example (of guilloche and a rainbow-shaded cord) occurs in the Apamea synagogue (391 CE); see R. Hachlili, *Ancient Mosaic Pavements: Themes, Issues, and Trends: Selected Studies* (Leiden and Boston, 2009), 198–204. See also J. Balty, *Mosaïques antiques du proche-orient: Chronologie, iconographie, interprétation* (Paris, 1995), 73, pl. XVIII.2.

16 V. Scheibelreiter-Gail, *Die Mosaiken Westkleinasiens: Tessellate des 2. Jahrhunderts v. Chr. bis Anfang des 7. Jahrhunderts n. Chr.* (Vienna, 2011), 359–60, no. 128, fig. 536. In western Asia Minor, the undulating interlaced bands motif is frequently found as a filling motif in the main field, but it is not as common in the border. The variations are known in the Stoa of Alytarches in Ephesos (fourth-early fifth century; *ibid.*, 212–14, no. 17, fig. 69; in the Tetrapylon House at Aphrodisias (turn of the fourth to the fifth century; *ibid.*, 206–8, no. 13, fig. 50); and in the Torba Basilica (second half of fifth–first half of sixth century; *ibid.*, 383, no. 140, fig. 617).

17 For the Saraçhane and Vilayet mosaics, see Dalgıç, “Mosaics of Constantinople,” 30–32 and 165. The laurel wreath is also found in the Perinthos basilica near Constantinople (mid-fifth century), M. A. Işın, “Marmara Ereğlisi Perinthos Bazilikası Kazısı, 1993,” *V. Müze Kurtarma Kazıları Semineri, 25–28 Nisan 1994, Didim* (1995): 27–37; in Hagia Sophia at Thessalonike (post-Galerian mid-fifth century), P. Asimakopoulou-Atzaka, *Σύνταγμα*

The date of the brick stamps, stylistic similarities between the Psamatia mosaics and datable decorated silver, and parallels with geometric motifs in other mosaics in and near Constantinople, especially the Vilayet floor, make a date in the second half of the fifth century most plausible.¹⁸

The Psamatia Neighborhood

The building that housed the mosaic was in the ancient district of Psamatia, a wealthy suburb of Constantinople, located at the southernmost end of the area between the Constantinian and Theodosian walls along the coastline of Propontis (fig. 12). Settlement in the area between the walls was not dense; it included only a few districts like Psamatia; monasteries, gardens, fields, and cemeteries occupied the rest.¹⁹

Our knowledge of the area in late antiquity is based on information from written sources and a few archaeological discoveries.²⁰ Following the lower branch of the Mese and leaving the city via the Golden Gate in the Constantinian walls, one would arrive at Psamatia. Immediately outside the gate was an area known as the Sigma, marked by a monumental column

τῶν παλαιοχριστιανικῶν ψηφιδωτῶν δαπέδων τῆς Ἑλλάδος, vol. 3, *Μακεδονία-Θράκη*, pt. 1, *Τὰ ψηφιδωτά δάπεδα τῆς Θεσσαλονίκης* (Thessalonike, 1998), I.2, XIV–XV, figs. 58–59; and in the late Roman villa at Halikarnassos, Scheibelreiter-Gail, *Die Mosaiken*, 278, no. 49, fig. 298. Otherwise, it was not as popular in Asia Minor and Thrace as it was in North Africa, Syria, and the western and northern provinces.

18 For dating suggestions by others see n. 3 above.

19 C. Mango, *Le développement urbain de Constantinople (IV–VII siècles)* (Paris, 2004), 49–50.

20 *Ibid.*, 47–50.



FIG. 12
Map of Constantinople
(drawing courtesy of
Albrecht Berger, with
modifications)

supporting a statue.²¹ To the south of the Sigma, slightly farther along the narrow coastal band, began a scattered series of estates that belonged in the early fifth century to Constantinople's highest level civic and military elite. All known residents were Christians, and, until the Psamatia mosaic, most of our information about their estates came from references to the monasteries and churches they established on their properties.

One of the distinguished residents of Psamatia was Saturninos, an important civil servant at the end of the fourth century.²² Other estates included those of Victor, a general and a friend of Saturninos;²³ Aurelianos, the prefect of the palace and count of the

Orient;²⁴ Stoudios, perhaps the homonymous prefect of Constantinople in 404;²⁵ and the palace of Helena.²⁶

By the end of the fourth century, some of the owners of these estates had established monasteries and churches on their properties.²⁷ We know Saturninos was the patron of the oldest monastery of Constantinople, called *tou Dalmatiou*, which

21 Ibid., 47. See also C. Mango, "The Triumphal Way of Constantinople and the Golden Gate," *DOP* 54 (2000): 179–80.

22 For Saturninos, see *PLRE* 1:807–8.

23 For Victor, see *PLRE* 2:957–59. For the estates of Saturninos and Victor see *Vita Isaaci*, *AASS Maii* VII.256D.

24 For Aurelianos, see *PLRE*, 1:128–29.

25 For Stoudios, see *PLRE*, 2:1036. He was likely a relative of the Stoudios who was a consul in 454 and founded the famous monastery; see C. Mango, "The Date of the Studius Basilica at Istanbul," *BMGs* 4 (1978): 121.

26 V. Tiftixoglu, "Die Helenianai nebst einigen anderen Besitzungen im Vorfeld des frühen Konstantinopel," in *Studien zur Frühgeschichte Konstantinopels*, ed. H.-G. Beck (Munich, 1973), 49–120, esp. 78–83.

27 Tiftixoglu, "Die Helenianai," 79–83; R. Janin, *Constantinople Byzantine*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1964), 317, 356–57, 422; A. Berger, *Untersuchungen zu den Patria Konstantinupoleos* (Bonn, 1988), 362, 605, 629–31.

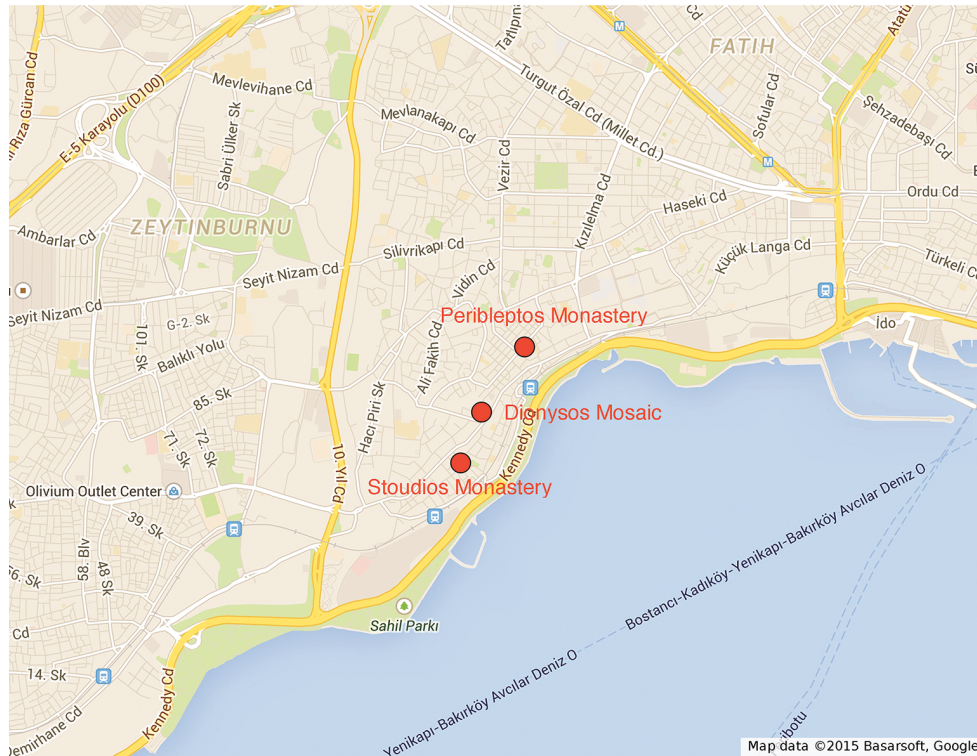


FIG. 13
The location of the
Psamatia mosaic site
in modern Istanbul
(courtesy of Google
Basarsoft)

he built for the monk Isaac (381–383).²⁸ Aurelianos built a church dedicated to St. Stephen on his estate in the fifth century.²⁹ The estate was across the street and south of the monastery of Isaac and near the Helenianai.³⁰ The latter was adjacent to a holy water source, the site of the eleventh-century monastery of St. Mary Peribleptos (currently Sulumanastır, the Surp Kevork Armenian church).³¹ Victor's estate

was farther to the southwest.³² Thus at one point the palace of Helena and the estates of Saturninos and Aurelianos were located in the area of Peribleptos, closer to the Constantinian walls. The mosaic site is about 450 meters southwest of Peribleptos. The Stoudios monastery, founded in 454, is an additional 250 meters to the southwest. These estates lined up along the coastal band about 150 meters from the shore of the Sea of Marmara (fig. 13).³³ The Psamatia mosaic may have belonged to one of them, or to an estate not mentioned in the sources.

The discovery of the sarcophagus at the mosaic site raises the possibility that the villa it decorated was

28 Saturninos first built the hermitage of the monk Isaac on his estate, and subsequently gave the entire property to the monastery of Isaac, which was later called Dalmatios; see *Vita Isaacii*, 256B–257B, and Janin, *Constantinople byzantine*, 422.

29 F. Nau, “Notes sur les mots πολιτικός et πολιτευόμενος et sur plusieurs textes grecs relatifs à S. Étienne,” *ROC* 11 (1906): 200, 215–16.

30 R. Janin, *La géographie ecclésiastique de l'empire Byzantin*, pt. 1, *Le siège de Constantinople et le patriarcat oecuménique* (Paris, 1969), 84.

31 According to Berger the Sigma was not a forum or part of a forum, but the entrance porch of the Helenianae, which he places on the site of Peribleptos; see A. Berger, “Tauros e Sigma: Due piazze di Costantinopoli,” in *Bisanzio e l'Occidente: Arte, archeologia, storia: Studi in onore di Fernanda de' Maffei*, ed. M. Bonfioli, R. Farioli Companati, and A. Garzya (Rome, 1996), 24–31. According to Mango, the Helenianae either adjoined or included the Sigma. In 435 another Theodosian forum was constructed in *loco qui Heliane dicitur*; see “The Triumphal Way,” 179–80. For the location of

Peribleptos, see idem, “The Monastery of St. Mary Peribleptos (Sulu Manastır) at Constantinople Revisited,” *REArm* 23 (1992): 473–93; F. Özgümüş, “Peribleptos Manastırı (Sulu Manastır),” *Sanat Tarihi Anıtları Dergisi* 14 (1997): 21–32.

32 This we know because Saturninos and Victor each built a hermitage for the monk Isaac on their estate; Isaac chose the one on Saturninos's estate because it was closer to the city; see *Vita Isaacii*, 256B–257B.

33 Since the modern coastal road (Sahil Yolu, now Kennedy Caddesi) was built in the 1950s on land reclaimed from the sea, the distance is currently 300 m from the shoreline.

built on top of a burial ground. The sarcophagus might have come from the structure that extended two meters below the level of the mosaic floor and was located to the west of it. A series of accidental finds, especially to the north and west of the cistern of St. Mokios, have confirmed the existence of Christian necropolises outside the Constantinian walls.³⁴ The tombs started just outside the fourth-century walls and extended to the gate in the Theodosian wall, which the Byzantines called the Cemetery Gate (Yeni Mevlevihane Kapısı). The church of St. Mokios and the necropolis occupied the largest part of the city's seventh hill. The cemetery began just north of the narrow coastal band, to the north of the Sigma and the Mese. It is possible that with the construction of the Theodosian walls, the tombs were covered with a layer of earth and built over, as was the ancient necropolis of Byzantium by the construction of the Constantinian walls.³⁵

The Architectural Context

The elite suburban residence from which the mosaic comes would have included a triclinium for dining and entertainment, a common feature in the domestic architecture of the period. This room was frequently the most impressive and elaborately decorated in the house.³⁶ As Dionysos was the god of feasting, frenzy, and wine, Dionysiac themes were popular in the decoration of these spaces.³⁷ One of the best preserved examples of

such dining rooms is in the Villa of the Falconer at Argos in Greece, which dates to the early sixth century (fig. 7).³⁸ Here, the large thiasos scene at the entrance to the triclinium was oriented toward diners reclining on a *stibadium*, a semicircular dining couch, the form of which is depicted in the mosaic pavement.³⁹

The layout of the mosaic and the few archaeological remains suggest the Psamatia triclinium was a large and roughly square space, with at least one confirmed entrance from the west. The floor would have extended to the east with a second panel. This extension was likely an apse or an alcove accommodating a *stibadium*, a common feature of villa triclinia especially after the fourth century.⁴⁰ It is possible that similar extensions to the north and south formed a triconch, but nothing survives on those sides. Windows along the east wall may have overlooked the Sea of Marmara and illuminated the mosaic.⁴¹ The orientation of the Dionysos

Mosaics of Greece and the Coast of Asia Minor" (PhD Diss., McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, 1999), 97–98.

38 Åkerström-Hougen, *Villa Falconer* (n. 8 above), 36, 110–16, fig. 68, 70.2, col. pl. 7.1. Another example of a late antique dining room from which part of the original furnishing survived is the House of Bacchus at Complutum in Spain; it dates to the late fourth century; see Dimas Fernández-Galiano, *Complutum*, vol. 2 (Madrid, 1984), 148–71, fig. 10, pl. LXXXI–LXXXII, XCI.

39 Originally, *stibadium* referred to an oblong cushion packed with hay or grass that sat on the ground. The company took its meal on the *stibadium* and no table was used. In triclinia, the *stibadium* was placed around the inner edge of a semicircle platform couch, curving around the semicircular part of the sigma table. The participants reclined on the couch, leaning against the *stibadium*. The front of the table and the two ends of the couch formed a straight line. The guests were served from this side; see Åkerström-Hougen, *Villa Falconer*, 101–2; see K. M. D. Dunbabin, *The Roman Banquet: Images of Conviviality* (Cambridge and New York, 2003), 199–202.

40 Dunbabin, "Convivial Spaces," 74.

41 The significance of the view is evident in Sidonius Apollinaris's comments about fifth-century Gaul, where the reception room shutters could be opened to reveal the countryside outside a villa (*Carmina* 22.215–20). In Constantinople, the significance of the sea view is evident in a law issued after 465, which aimed to preserve the sea views of the reception rooms of adjacent buildings (*CI CIC* 8.10.12.4). See also S. Ellis, "Shedding Light in Late Roman Housing," in *Housing in Late Antiquity: From Palaces to Shops*, ed. L. Lavan, L. Özgenel, and A. C. Sarantis (Leiden and Boston, 2007), 291–92. However, the view behind the *stibadium* was traditionally not the priority. In the Psamatia reception room one would expect the *stibadium* to face the east, toward the sea view, yet the only surviving entrance, the extension of the floor, and the orientation of the Dionysos medallion suggest that the *stibadium* faced west.

34 Mango, *Le développement* (n. 19 above), 47–48.

35 With the construction of the Constantinian walls, the Christian cemetery became intramural. A new cemetery was built outside the walls, but the tombs of the old cemetery were covered, not removed, *ibid.*, 47.

36 Dunbabin, "Convivial Spaces: Dining and Entertainment in the Roman Villa," *JRA* 9 (1996): 74; *eadem*, "Triclinium and Stibadium," in *Dining in a Classical Context*, ed. W. J. Slater (Ann Arbor, 1991), 128–29; S. Ellis, "Classical Reception Rooms in Romano-British Houses," *Britannia* 26 (1995): 163–78; *idem*, "Power, Architecture and Decor: How the Late Roman Aristocrat Appeared to His Guests," in *Roman Art in the Private Sphere: New Perspectives on the Architecture and Decor of the Domus, Villa, and Insula*, ed. E. K. Gazda (Ann Arbor, 1991), 119; S. Malmberg, *Dazzling Dining: Banquets as an Expression of Imperial Legitimacy* (Uppsala, 2003), 74–78.

37 P. Zanker and B. C. Ewald, *Living with Myths: The Imagery of Roman Sarcophagi* (Oxford, 2011), 145–48; C. Kondoleon, *Domestic and Divine: Roman Mosaics in the House of Dionysos* (Ithaca, 1994), 191–220 and 31–71; D. Parrish, "A Mythological Theme in the Decoration of Late Roman Dining Rooms: Dionysus and His Circle," *RA* 2 (1995): 307–32, esp. 24–25; Z. Welch, "The Dionysiac

figure in the central circle also suggests the mosaic was intended to be viewed from the east (fig. 3).⁴²

Iconography and Composition

The Psamatia mosaic has important iconographic and compositional differences from other Roman and late antique representations of Dionysos and his retinue. The diagrammatic organization of the mosaic invites studying its iconography in three layers, moving from the outside in: first the seasons frame, then the thiasos in the outer circle, and finally Dionysos and his chariot in the central medallion.

The Seasons Frame

Busts of the four seasons originally framed the circular composition of the Dionysiac thiasos and the medallion of the triumphant god at the center. The seasons are one of the most common themes on mosaic floors, especially from the second century onward, and they frequently accompany Dionysiac subjects.⁴³ They can be arranged in a row, in a cross-pattern, or, as in the Psamatia mosaic, in the corners of centralized compositions. They can appear in bust or full figure, can be male or female, and can be winged or not. They wear crowns of seasonal plants and carry distinctive attributes relating to the agricultural activities or produce of the season. Seasons are usually regarded as relatively straightforward images representing fertility and

regeneration and were believed to bring viewers abundance, prosperity, and good fortune.⁴⁴

Season imagery was common in the mosaics of Constantinople. The entire body of known figural mosaics comes from no more than five sites, and season busts appear at three: Çatalçeşme (late second century); Saraçhane (mid-fourth to mid-fifth century); and Psamatia.⁴⁵ The Saraçhane and Psamatia seasons are very similar: female busts at the corners of a centralized composition hold seasonal attributes in sashes before their chests.⁴⁶

The seasons are especially appropriate as corner fillings in orthogonal visual surfaces and they are usually decorative or have minimal symbolic meaning unless they appear consistently around the same deities.⁴⁷ In a series of mosaics from North Africa, for example, the seasons surround the god Annus or Aion

42 For the relationship between the orientation of the images and the seating arrangement, see Dunbabin, "Triclinium and Stibadium," 126–29.

43 On seasons imagery in general, with bibliography, see L. Abad Casal, "Horai/Horae," in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* vol. 5, pt. 1 (Zurich, 1990), 510–38. The most comprehensive account remains G. M. A. Hanfmann, *The Season Sarcophagus in Dumbarton Oaks* (Cambridge, MA, 1951). Also see Frank G. J. M. Müller, *The So-Called Peleus and Thetis Sarcophagus in the Villa Albani* (Amsterdam, 1994), 47–64. General discussions of season mosaics include K. M. D. Dunbabin, *Mosaics of Roman North Africa: Studies in Iconography and Patronage* (New York, 1978), 158–61, 186; David Parrish, *Seasons Mosaics of Roman North Africa* (Rome, 1984), 11–83; H. Slim, "Eternal Time and Cyclical Time," in *Mosaics of Roman Africa: Floor Mosaics from Tunisia*, ed. M. Blanchard-Lemée (New York, 1996), 37–64. On the mosaics of Roman Britain, see R. Ling, "The Seasons in Romano-British Pavements," *Britannia* 14 (1983), 13–22.

44 Dunbabin, *North Africa*, 158. Also see H. Maguire, "The Good Life," in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. G. W. Bowersock and P. Brown (Cambridge, MA, 1999), 242–43.

45 For the corpus of mosaics from Constantinople, see Dalgıç, "Mosaics of Constantinople" (n. 3 above). The Çatalçeşme mosaic is much earlier than the others and the seasons are different in their layout and their use of both male and female busts; Dalgıç, "The Pre-Constantinian Mosaic Floors in Istanbul," in *Anathemata Eortika: Studies in Honor of Thomas F. Matheus*, ed. J. D. Alchermes, H. C. Evans, and T. K. Thomas (Mainz, 2009), 224–30. Other season mosaics found in the vicinity of Constantinople are from Bandırma, Bursa (Prusa ad Olympum), and Bolu-Konuralp (Prusias ad Hypium). For the Bandırma seasons, see F. Cimok, *Mosaics in Istanbul* (Istanbul, 2005). For the Bursa seasons, see R. Okcu, "Prusia Ad Olympum Mozaikleri," *Journal of Mosaic Research* 3 (2009): 31–51, here 48–50. The Konuralp mosaic is unpublished.

46 Corners filled with female busts or full figures become particularly common in Northern Syria in the fourth century, such as at the Constantinian Villa at Daphne, near Antioch. See J. Balty, *Mosaïques antiques de Syrie* (Brussels, 1977), 72–75; F. Baratte, *Catalogue des mosaïques romaines et paléochrétiennes du Musée du Louvre* (Paris, 1978), 99–118, figs. 94–25; Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements* (n. 10 above), 226–56, pls. LIV–LV. In western Asia Minor corner seasons busts are found in Aphrodisias (second half of fourth, fifth, or sixth century); Halikarnassos (two sets in the same house, second to sixth century); Miletos (third–fourth/seventh century?); and Ephesos (no later than 300). Earlier examples similar to the Çatalçeşme and Bandırma seasons are found in Metropolis and Ephesos. For bibliography and dating see Scheibelreiter-Gail, *Mosaiken Westkleinasiens* (n. 16 above), 131–32, cat. nos. 11, 22, 38, 49, 84, 88. For a late antique season bust from Thessalonike, see Asimakopoulou-Atzaka, *Εὐταγία* (n. 17 above), fig. 61. For a set of corner seasons in Larissa, Greece dated to the end of the fourth century, see Welch, "Dionysiac Mosaics," 282, figs. 151–53, cat. no. 30.

47 Dunbabin, *North Africa*, 158–61.

(the god of eternal and ever-recurrent time), and are commonly accompanied by a calendar or a zodiac.⁴⁸ Seasons are also found flanking portraits on sarcophagi, as if encircling human lives, and flanking mythical scenes, often Dionysian, both on sarcophagi and mosaics.⁴⁹ These seasons associate the central subjects with eternal time, death, and its ramifications, and with cyclical time and the cyclical activities of humans. Their meaning may depend on whether the context is funerary or domestic. Jaś Elsner has shown that visual expressions of the imagery of the seasons structured circular compositions in Roman mosaics and sarcophagus reliefs, inscribing the space within a seasonal cycle and suggesting both the beginning and the end.⁵⁰

The symbolism of the seasons as the spirits of cyclical time is connected with Dionysos, who as the god of plants (which grow to maturity, die back, and return in an annual cycle), died and was resurrected each year.⁵¹ Framing the triumphant Dionysos, however, the seasons may also symbolize the eternal victory of good over evil.⁵² Often represented in triumphal arches, the seasons were explicitly associated with victory in imperial Roman art, especially after Trajan. In Roman triumphal symbolism, every victory or change of reign was perceived as a renewal, and the seasons were often part of the processions.⁵³ On sarcophagi this triumphal symbolism translated as a victory over the forces of evil at an individual level. In domestic mosaic floors, the seasons symbolized hope for the continuity and renewal of abundance and fertility and of good luck for both patron and viewers.

In the lines of the *Dionysiaka* of Nonnos, a contemporary epic poem, discussed below, that I believe may have links to the Psamatia mosaic, we find “circling

time (aion), rolling the four-season year . . .” as if it were a wheel like the one represented on the Psamatia mosaic floor.⁵⁴ There the seasons surround the thiasos that runs in a circular band around Dionysos, the joyful cortege representing the “good life” that both patron and viewers hoped would continue through the endless cycles of the seasons.

The Thiasos

The thiasos is probably the most common Dionysiac theme in ancient art. It is found in scenes from the god’s life, including his triumph, and it also appears by itself.⁵⁵ Whether on sarcophagi or in domestic wall paintings and mosaics, the thiasos celebrated the enjoyment of feasting and the love of life. In late antiquity it was a popular theme for the decoration and furnishing of dining rooms, occasionally in mosaics (as at Argos and Sarrin),⁵⁶ but more often in luxury objects (such as the large and the two small silver plates in the Mildenhall treasure, and the two silver ewers in the Sevso treasure) and textiles (the famous “Veil from Antinoe”).⁵⁷ These offer the closest iconographic and stylistic parallels for the Psamatia thiasos.

In most Dionysiac processions, human and mythological figures take part together: the god; maenads carrying cultic objects; a Bacchic child; beast-like satyrs; old Silenos; and Pan.⁵⁸ The thiasos scene on the

48 D. Parrish, “The Mosaic of Aion and the Seasons from Haidra (Tunisia): An Interpretation of Its Meaning and Importance,” *Antiquité tardive* 3 (1995): 167–91.

49 Hanfmann, *Season Sarcophagus*.

50 Elsner has also identified literary expression of the circular composition of the seasons encircling and structuring the text in Philostratos’s *Imagines*; see “Making Myth Visual: The Horae of Philostratos and the Dance of the Text,” *MDAIRA* 107 (2000): 253–76.

51 A. H. Walle, *Pagans and Practitioners: Expanding Biblical Scholarship* (New York, 2010), 101.

52 R. Turcan, *Les sarcophages romains à représentations dionysiaques: Essai de chronologie et d’histoire religieuse* (Paris, 1966), 605–7.

53 Ibid., 605.

54 Nonnos, *Dionysiaka*, ed. W. H. D. Rouse, H. J. Rose, and L. R. Lind, Loeb (Cambridge, MA and London, 1940), 36.422–23; 3:30. Also see J. C. Anderson, “A Polygonal Ring with Signs of the Zodiac,” *Gesta* vol. 18, no. 1 (1979): 41.

55 According to Zanker the real interest was not in the illustrated mythological stories, but in the thiasos that accompanied them. See Zanker and Ewald, *Living with Myths* (n. 37 above), 155.

56 The number of mosaics with Dionysiac imagery from Greece and western Asia Minor decreases dramatically in late antiquity. See Welch, “Dionysiac Mosaics,” 262, and Parrish, “Mythological Theme,” 308–24 (both n. 37 above).

57 For the veil from Antinoe, see M. H. Rutschowskaya, *Tissus coptes* (Paris, 1990), 82, figs. pp. 28–29. The main register is decorated with a Dionysiac thiasos, and the episodes of Dionysos’s birth and infancy are in a smaller register. For the Mildenhall treasure, see n. 138.

58 Maenads are often confused with nymphs since both are human-looking women that accompany Dionysos; see G. Hedreen, “Silenos, Nymphs, and Maenads,” *JHS* 114 (1994): 47–69. Nymphs are the mythical figures who raised Dionysos and also followed him in his adulthood. The maenads, on the other hand, are divided into two distinct categories: the mythical maenads, who are the women of Thebes driven into the mountains by Dionysos, and the historical maenads, the women who participated in the rituals of the cult

fifth-century ewer from the Sevso treasury, for example, shows a young woman attending a Bacchic child, in the company of the adult Dionysos.⁵⁹ Dionysiac processions like these do not usually refer to specific myths. It is also common for them to include cultic objects that relate to the worship of Dionysos, like baskets, pieces of animal flesh, and sacred snakes.⁶⁰ This visual conflation of myth and ritual is typical of ancient Greek and Roman art, and its makers and users probably did not make a clear distinction between the two. The degree to which the meaning of the widespread Dionysiac themes in late antique dining rooms were narrative or cultic is difficult to establish, as is the relationship between these images and the religious affiliations of their patrons.⁶¹

It is interesting that the surviving features of the Psamatia thiasos betray careful exclusion of the elements of both cultic and mythic symbolism. The god is in a medallion, separated into another realm and no longer part of the procession. The human-looking satyrs are devoid of grotesque features, and Pan is absent, while a male musician in secular clothes

and a red Phrygian cap typically worn at festivals is included.⁶² This suggests that the Psamatia image represents a festive reenactment of the thiasos rather than a depiction of a cultic celebration or the mythological subject itself. It may even have been inspired by a theatrical performance, like those that likely took place on the mosaic floor. We know that mime and pantomime performances accompanied by musicians and dancers were the usual entertainments in private dinner parties at home and they became particularly popular in late antiquity, as we shall see later.⁶³

Dionysos and His Chariot

In traditional representations of Dionysos and his chariot, felines harnessed to the car appear in profile and full figure and they precede the chariot, usually led by a satyr or Pan. The god usually stands, but sometimes sits in his chariot. Ariadne may accompany him, although more frequently a personification of victory rides beside him. When the god holds the reins himself, he usually does so with his left hand, holding in his right either a *thyrsos* (fennel staff) or a wine cup. He generally wears a long-sleeved robe that reaches to the ankles and he always wears a cape, usually covering his left arm and shoulder (fig. 14).⁶⁴ In the reconstruction

of Dionysos. For the representation of the original maenad, see L. B. Joyce, "Maenads and Bacchantes: Images of Female Ecstasy in Greek and Roman Art," (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1997), 51–52. Diodoros, Pausanias, and Plutarch described maenads in the sources as participants of the Bacchic bands of women in many Greek cities, in satyr-shows that took place in Ionia and in Pontos in the second century, and as celebrants of the "orgia" of Dionysos. For bibliography and examples in Greek art see L.-A. Touchette, *The Dancing Maenad Reliefs: Continuity and Change in Roman Copies* (London, 1995), 20–21 and 52.

59 M. M. Mango and A. G. Bennett, *The Sevso Treasure* (Ann Arbor, 1994), 217.

60 Touchette, *The Dancing Maenad Reliefs*, 36. For later examples, see Dunbabin, "Domestic Dionysus" (n. 13 above), 197–204.

61 For the connection of the iconography of certain myths to the cult and the problems of interpretation of the Dionysiac imagery used as decoration in a domestic context, see Dunbabin, "Domestic Dionysus," 197–205. For a summary of the scholarship favoring a relationship between these images and the religious affiliations of their patrons, see R. E. Leader-Newby, *Silver and Society in Late Antiquity: Functions and Meanings of Silver Plate in the Fourth to Seventh Centuries* (Aldershot and Burlington, 2003), 148–49 and 157–58; and G. Agosti, "Contextualizing Nonnus' Visual World," in *Nonnus of Panopolis in Context: Poetry and Cultural Milieu in Late Antiquity with a Section on Nonnus and the Modern World*, ed. K. Spanoudakis (Berlin, 2014), 142. For the importance of Dionysos in late antique paganism and his role in late pagan thought, see Bowersock, "Dionysus and His World," in idem, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity* (Ann Arbor, 1993), 41–53.

62 For the Phrygian cap, see D. Wray, *Catullus and the Poetics of Roman Manhood* (Cambridge and New York, 2001), 85.

63 C. P. Jones, "Dinner-Theatre," in *Dining in a Classical Context*, ed. W. J. Slater (Ann Arbor, 1991), 185–91; J. Rossiter, "Convivium and Villa in Late Antiquity," in ibid., 203; R. Webb, *Demons and Dancers: Performance in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, MA, 2008), 27. Pantomime and mime were principal forms of performance in late antiquity. In the former, a single dancer, called a pantomime, silently enacted all roles in the story using masks. In the latter, an actor called a *mimos* (mime) spoke the lines of a scripted text without using masks. Both pantomime and mime performers were accompanied by music and chorus, and the mimes sometimes danced. The popularity of pantomime in Constantinople is attested in sources well into the sixth century; see O. Weinreich, *Epigrammstudien*, vol. 1, *Epigram und Pantomimus* (Heidelberg, 1948), 77–82, 97–111, and Al. Cameron, *Circus Factions: Blues and Greens at Rome and Byzantium* (Oxford, 1976): 224–29. See also K. M. D. Dunbabin, "Mythology and Theatre in the Mosaics of the Graeco-Roman East," in *Using Images in Late Antiquity*, ed. S. Birk, T. M. Kristensen, and B. Poulsen (Oxford; Philadelphia, 2014), 246.

64 Matz distinguished four major versions of the triumph: the tiger-chariot with standing Dionysos; the centaur-chariot with standing Dionysos; the elephant-chariot with standing Dionysos; and the reclining or seated Dionysos in centaur- and tiger-chariot; F. Matz, *Die dionysischen Sarkophage*, vol. 2, *Die antiken Sarkophagreliefs* (Berlin, 1968). The effeminate nature of Dionysos

of the central medallion of the Psamatia mosaic suggested here, Dionysos is in the chariot, either with Ariadne or by himself, wearing a white cape that covers his left shoulder and holding the reins in his left hand. The curved car suggests that it is frontally positioned and that it was harnessed to two panthers, as in other representations of the subject (fig. 15).

A frontal chariot with symmetrical animals stretching upward and galloping on each side is typical of the representation of motion across the heavens, as in depictions of Helios in his horse-drawn quadriga.⁶⁵ This image often appears at the center of zodiac mosaics.⁶⁶ Dionysos also appears occasionally in a frontal chariot, as in a fourth-century mosaic in Ecija (Seville) in Spain, where he is pulled by centaurs (fig. 16).⁶⁷ What makes the Psamatia mosaic unusual

with a long robe was particularly emphasized during late antiquity; see K. M. D. Dunbabin, "The Triumph of Dionysus on Mosaics in North Africa," *PBSR* 39 (1971): 53. Also see V. F. Lenzen, *The Triumph of Dionysus on Textiles of Late Antique Egypt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1960), 2–4.

65 The closest depiction is a relief of a deity in a horse chariot on a third-century breastplate in Mainz. Here two pairs of horses diverge all the way to the sides, leaving the cart and two wheels in the foreground at the center, heading upward in opposite directions, perhaps to evoke the god's ascent into the sky; see E. Künzl, "Sol, Lupa, Zwillingsgottheiten und Hercules: Neue Funde und bemerkungen zur Ikonographie römischer Paradewaffen," *Archäologisches Korrespondenzblatt* 34 (2004): 389–94, pl. 1–2.

66 Mostly in the synagogue floors of the Holy Land, dated between the fourth and sixth century. For the most recent discussion of the synagogue zodiacs in Palestine and further bibliography, see R. Hachlili, "The Zodiac in Ancient Jewish Synagogal Art: A Review," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (2002): 219–58, and J. Magness, "Heaven on Earth: Helios and the Zodiac Cycle in Ancient Palestinian Synagogues," *DOP* 59 (2005): 1–52. For an earlier example (mid-third century) from Münster-Sarmsheim, Germany, see K. Parlasca, *Die römischen Mosaiken in Deutschland* (Berlin, 1959), 86–88, pls. 84.2, 86–87.

67 It has been argued that the frontal depiction of Dionysos's chariot is the result of a contamination between the triumphs of Dionysos and Neptune; G. López Monteagudo, "Sobre una particular iconografía del Triunfo de Baco en dos mosaicos romanos de la Bética," *Anales de arqueología cordobesa* 9 (1998), 191–222. I know of six instances in which the chariot is represented frontally: Noheda (near Cuenca), Ecija (Seville), Dion, Corinth, el-Djem (maison de Tertulla), and the Antioch triumph mosaics. In Antioch and el-Djem the chariot is drawn by panthers, in Corinth and Dion by sea monsters, and in Noheda and Seville by centaurs. For the pertinent bibliography, see the list of published triumph of Dionysos mosaics from throughout the Roman world in n. 74. The closest version to the Psamatia mosaic is the panther chariot in Maison de Tertulia, el-Djem (ca. 200–220);

is the position of the extant panther: it lopes up from behind the chariot, its lower body obscured by the car. In every other frontal chariot image the beasts are either directly in front of the car or diverge from it symmetrically in opposite directions, and they lope upward. In the Psamatia mosaic, the panther, who is behind the car, cannot draw it forward or to the side, and assuming there was a second panther, they would have seemed to be pulling the chariot against the picture plane.⁶⁸ Thus in the Psamatia mosaic the god, unusually, appears to be departing the scene, perhaps ascending to heaven.

This iconography has parallels in other media. In a funerary context, it appears in the ceiling painting of a tomb chamber in Sousse, Tunisia, where Dionysos is shown frontally in his chariot with the two panthers heading in opposite directions.⁶⁹ This can most compellingly be interpreted as the god's ascension, perhaps relating to the pagan promise of afterlife and salvation.⁷⁰ Dionysos in a frontal chariot is also represented in a private context. On the group of late antique textile roundels from Egypt, for example, the god stands in a car drawn by rampant beasts, accompanied by male and

see Dunbabin, "Triumph of Dionysus," 57, pl. XVa. There Dionysos appears encircled by a wreath inscribed in a square, with cupids holding seasonal attributes filling the corners; two tigers diverge in opposite directions pulling the frontal chariot. The lower part of the mosaic is missing and the position of the animals is unclear—whether they were in front and full view or at the sides or behind the cart. In any case, these comparanda are all earlier, dating to the second and third century, except for the one from Noheda and Seville (perhaps fourth century), which belongs to the centaur group.

68 The forepart of the animal, which emerges from a laurel wreath, may suggest that the mosaicist, faced with the challenge of fitting the chariot and the panthers into a circle, chose to depict just the protome of the animal (as is common in scrolls, roundels, etc.) to avoid the problems of representing the foreshortened legs. I owe this idea to Katherine Dunbabin. The only other instance I know of where the beasts remain behind the car is in the medieval floor mosaic depicting Alexander's ascension in Otranto Cathedral.

69 L. Foucher, "Un hypogée romain à Sousse," *Karthago* 4 (1953): 88, pl. Ia.

70 For pagan grave inscriptions that allude to the immortality of the soul, the idea that the deceased lives on and joins the Olympian gods, see A. Chaniotis, "The Conversion of the Temple of Aphrodite at Aphrodisias in Context," in *From Temple to Church: Destruction and Renewal of Local Cultic Topography in Late Antiquity*, ed. J. Hahn (Leiden and Boston, 2008), 258–59.



FIG. 14 Triumph of Dionysos mosaic, Zeugma (photo courtesy of Mehmet Önal and A Turizm Yayınları)



FIG. 15 Hypothetical reconstruction of the central medallion of the Psamatia mosaic by author and Ekin Dirik



FIG. 16
Dionysos mosaic,
Écija (Seville), Spain
(photo courtesy of
Museo Histórico
Municipal de Écija)



FIG. 17 Textile with the Triumph of Dionysos, said to be from Panopolis (Akhmim) (photo courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art)

female attendants; this, too, has been interpreted as the ascension of Dionysos (fig. 17).⁷¹

An Innovative Triumph of Dionysos

Though Dionysos riding in his chariot accompanied by an exultant band of followers was known in ancient Greek art,⁷² during the Roman Empire it became an

exceptionally popular episode of Dionysiac myth. Representations of the god's triumphant return to the west from his long travels in India, where he spread his gift of wine, were particularly common in the late second to the mid-third century, especially in sarcophagus reliefs⁷³ and floor mosaics.⁷⁴ This has been linked to

71 The Hermitage, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Boston, London, and Berlin textiles; see Lenzen, *Triumph of Dionysos on Textiles*, 21–23.

72 Already in the fourth century BCE, it appears on Attic vase paintings and on a pebble mosaic from Olynthus. For Attic vase paintings, see the reference at F. Matz, *Die Dionysischen Sarkophage*, 2:229, notes 61–63. For the mosaic, see D. M. Robinson, *Excavations at Olynthus 12* (Baltimore, 1946), 344–57, pl. I. The triumphant aspects of the iconography were especially emphasized in the Hellenistic period, when Dionysos's campaign to India was regarded as a prototype for the victories of Alexander; Matz, *Die Dionysischen Sarkophage*, 2:228–30.

73 Matz, *Die Dionysischen Sarkophage*, 2: cat. nos. 78–161; Turcan, *Les sarcophages romains* (n. 52 above), 238–49 and 441–72; K. Lehmann, *Dionysiac Sarcophagi in Baltimore* (New York, 1942), 12–13, 26–33.

74 For a discussion of the theme in North African mosaics and the relation between the mosaic and sarcophagus representations, see Dunbabin, “Triumph of Dionysus,” 52–65. I know of forty-three published triumph of Dionysos mosaics from throughout the Roman world, twelve of which are from North Africa. Dunbabin lists nine, *ibid.*, 52; for the remaining three see L. Foucher, “Le char de Dionysos,” in *La mosaïque gréco-romaine: II^e colloque international pour l'étude de la mosaïque antique, Vienne 1971* (Paris, 1975), 57–58, fig. XX-2; and Kondoleon, *Domestic and Divine* (n. 37 above), 217–18, figs. 139–40, and 195–96, fig. 121. Seventeen triumph

the god's rising popularity in the period and the well-established traditions of Roman triumphal and civic religious processions and their iconography.⁷⁵ Possible explanations for its popularity in domestic floor mosaics, which do not necessarily have a profound religious meaning,⁷⁶ are the easy accessibility of models due

to its prevalence on sarcophagi,⁷⁷ or the eagerness of patrons for images of the Dionysiac processions that they sponsored in public festivals.⁷⁸ While some of these representations of Dionysos and his retinue have specific details connecting them directly to the Indian campaign, such as the inclusion of Indian captives in the procession, others appear to refer more generally to the god's victories on earth, after which he ascended to Olympos.

In the Roman world the triumph of Dionysos theme was most common in the mosaics of North Africa and the Iberian peninsula; there are also isolated examples from Sepphoris, Antioch, Zeugma, Nea Paphos, Corinth, Dion, Ostia, Sarsina, and Trier.⁷⁹ By the end of the third century, the triumph of Dionysos disappears from sarcophagus decoration.⁸⁰ At about the same time, it ceases to appear in North African mosaics, though it continues to be used in Spanish floors during the fourth and fifth century as a regional phenomenon.⁸¹

In late antiquity, the triumph of Dionysos appears only occasionally in the decoration and furnishings of houses.⁸² The only examples in mosaics,

mosaics in Spain and Portugal have been published so far, fifteen in M. P. San Nicolas Pedraz, "Mosaicos y espacio en la villa romana de fuente alamo (Córdoba, España)," in *L'Africa Romana* (Sassari, 1994), 1289–1305, figs. VII–XIII. One is in López Monteagudo, "Sobre una particular iconografía," 192, fig. 1. The last one has been recently published in M. Á. Valero Tévar, "The Late-Antique Villa at Noheda (Villar de Domingo García) Near Cuenca And Its Mosaics," *JRA* 26 (2013): 307–30. Valero Tévar notes that in Spanish mosaics alone there are some twenty examples of the subject; *ibid.* 328 and n. 64. Thirteen more triumph mosaics come from different parts of the Roman world. For the ones in Corinth, Dion, Antioch, Ostia, Gerasa, Sepphoris, Nea Paphos (House of Aion), and Zouede, see López Monteagudo, "Sobre una particular iconografía," 195–208, figs. 5–6, 8, 21, 24–27. For the one from Nea Paphos (House of Dionysos), see Kondoleon, *Domestic and Divine*, 192–221. For the triumph of Dionysos mosaic from Sarsina, see G. V. Gentili, *Sarsina: La città romana, il Museo archeologico* (Faenza, 1967), 56, pl. 20. For the one from Trier, see Foucher, "Le char de Dionysos," 59, fig. XXIII–2. For the one from Zeugma see M. Önal, *Mosaics of Zeugma* (Istanbul, 2002), 19. For the subject in other media see C. Augé, "Dionysos (in Peripheria Orientali)," in *Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*, vol. 3, pts. 1 and 2 (Zurich, 1986), 3.1:514–31, and 3.2:406–19 (for illustrations). For recent general publications on the subject, see L. Buccino, *Dioniso trionfatore: Percorsi e interpretazione del mito del trionfo indiano nelle fonti e nell'iconografia antiche* (Rome, 2013), and J. Boardman, *The Triumph of Dionysos: Convivial Processions, From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Oxford, 2014).

75 Dunbabin, "Triumph of Dionysus," 52. It was also in this period that several Roman emperors chose to represent themselves in the guise of Dionysos returning from India; see G. W. Bowersock, "Dionysus as an Epic Hero," in *Selected Papers on Late Antiquity* (Bari, 2000), 113–15; K. W. Harl, *Civic Coins and Civic Politics in the Roman East, AD 180–275* (Berkeley, 1987), 45–48; Kondoleon, *Domestic and Divine*, 221. Also see Turcan, *Les sarcophages romains*, 368–84. For the possible religious meaning of the Dionysiac iconography in sarcophagus decoration, which is a complex and ongoing debate, see F. Cumont, *Recherches sur le symbolisme funéraire des romains* (Paris, 1942), 135–36; A. Geyer, *Das Problem des Realitätsbezuges in der dionysischen Bildkunst der Kaiserzeit* (Würzburg, 1977), 42–93; R. Turcan, "Les sarcophages romains et le problème du symbolisme funéraire," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2.16.2 (1978): 1700–35; A. D. Nock, "Sarcophagi and Symbolism," *AJA* 50 (1946): 140–70; Zanker and Ewald, *Living with Myths* (n. 37 above), 45–50.

76 Dunbabin, "Triumph of Dionysus," 64–65. Almost all the triumph mosaics with known provenance come from private houses. Occasionally they come from public buildings, such as the triumph mosaic at the baths of Trajan at Achola, North Africa; *ibid.*,

53. An exception is the doubtful case of the panel from a tomb at Constantine in Algeria, F. G. de Pachtere et al., *Inventaire des mosaïques de la Gaule et de l'Afrique* (Paris, 1909), 218. For a discussion of the difficulties of establishing a religious aspect in North African mosaics, see Dunbabin, *North Africa* (n. 43 above), 137–40.

77 Dunbabin, *North Africa*, 182.

78 Kondoleon, *Domestic and Divine*, 221. As fewer public religious processions were celebrated in late antiquity, sponsorship may have shifted from public to private festivities.

79 See n. 74 above.

80 Turcan, *Les sarcophages romains*, 353–54; there is a chronological table of the sarcophagi with Dionysiac subjects at 356–62. After the third century, the imagery of the cupid, grapes, and vine tendrils, recharged with Christian symbolism, surged in popularity, especially between 320 and 360. For possible interpretations of these themes in Christian sarcophagi, see J. Elsner, "Decorative Imperatives Between Concealment and Display: The Form of Sarcophagi," *Res* 61–62 (2012): 184.

81 For example the mosaics of Torre de Palma, Portugal (fourth century), Taragone (fourth century), Oliver del Centeno (Caceres) (fourth century), Fuente Alamo, Córdoba (fourth century), Baños de Valdearados, Burgos (mid-fifth century?), Liedena, Navarra (fifth century), and Nodeha (ca. 400). See San Nicolas Pedraz, "Mosaicos y Espacio," 1294, figs. XI-1 and 2, XII-1 and 2; XIII-1. Also see López Monteagudo, "Sobre una particular iconografía," 191–222.

82 The increased popularity of genre scenes from the third century on, the relative decrease in interest in mythological subjects

excepting the Spanish ones, are from Nea Paphos on Cyprus (mid-fourth century) and Sheikh Zouède in northern Sinai (fifth or sixth century) (fig. 9). The Nea Paphos example is part of a larger panel depicting Dionysos's birth and scenes from various other myths.⁸³ Here, the procession is solemn and slow moving. The god, in a chariot drawn by centaurs, is accompanied by old Silenos on a mule, and a maenad and a male follower carrying ritual objects. In contrast, the thiasos from the Sinai example, which comprises the lower part of a two-part panel, is ecstatic; it includes maenads, satyrs, Pan, cupids, and Heracles. The procession, shown in two registers, appears to be moving around a circle,⁸⁴ which is reminiscent of the Psamatia thiasos, except that the god, in a centaur-drawn chariot, is part of the cortege.

Other late antique representations of the triumph include two ivory pyxides, one dated to the mid-sixth century and possibly made in Syria, said to have been found in Rome and now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and another dated to the last quarter of the fifth century, now at the Museo Civico Archeologico, Bologna.⁸⁵ While the New York pyxis has the battle scene from the Indian campaign, the Bologna pyxis shows four subsequent scenes from

the god's life: his birth and first bath; sitting on a throne as an older child; learning to ride a goat; and standing as a youthful god on a chariot drawn by panthers and accompanied by his thiasos. A relief carving at the rim of a marble sigma table that survives in a small corner fragment and dates to the late fourth or early fifth century shows a seated Dionysos alone in his chariot drawn by two centaurs.⁸⁶ It is originally from Vidin (Ratiaria) in Serbia, and is now in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. Finally, a series of textile roundels from Egypt are filled with the image of the god in a frontally oriented chariot, flanked by his followers, perhaps the most suitable way to fit everything into a small circular space.⁸⁷ In terms of iconography and format, the textiles are the best comparison to the Psamatia mosaic, but stylistically the ecstatic mood and the circular movement of the Sinai mosaic are closer.

Geographically, the partly preserved Dionysiac scene that decorated the famous peristyle mosaic of the Great Palace in Constantinople, variously dated between the mid-fifth and the seventh century, is most relevant to the Psamatia triumph.⁸⁸ This procession is led by a woman carrying a jug, perhaps of wine, on her shoulder, followed by Pan carrying a Bacchic child on his back, and by an elephant with a rider; only the left hand of the rider has survived and it holds a stick (fig. 18). The procession moves from left to right and there is no sign of ecstatic behavior. The only Dionysiac episode that includes an elephant is the god's triumphant return from India, but there are no traces of Dionysos and his chariot in the Great Palace scene; the beginning and the end of the cortege are missing, but there is space at most for one more figure on each side. The only known triumph mosaic that includes an elephant in the cortege is from Setif, Algeria, and

in favor of genre scenes, and the rise of Christianity might be factors. For Dionysos mosaics in Greece and Asia Minor see Welch, "Dionysiac Mosaics" (n. 37 above), 259–71. However, Dionysos subjects remained popular in other media. For examples see Augé, "Dionysus (in Peripheria Orientali)," and Parrish, "A Mythological Theme" (n. 37 above), 307–32, esp. 24–25.

83 W. A. Daszewski, *Dionysos der Erlöser* (Mainz and Rhein, 1985). Bowersock posits a conscious parallel here between the lives of Dionysos and Christ in "Dionysus and His World" (n. 61 above). For bibliography and a recent interpretation, see M. T. Olszewski, "The Iconographic Programme of the Cyprus Mosaic from the House of Aion Reinterpreted as an Anti-Christian Polemic," in *Et in Arcadia ego: Studia memoriae professoris Thomae Mikocki dicata*, ed. W. Dobrowolski (Warsaw, 2013), 207–39.

84 M. T. Olszewski, "Dwie Późnoantycznemozaiki Synonimiczne z Szeikh Zued (Egipt) i Vinon (Francja)," *Światowit* no. IV-A (2002): 99–105.

85 For the New York pyxis, see "Pyxis with the Triumph of Dionysos in India [Byzantine]" (17.190.56) in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York, 2000–), <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/17.190.56>. (October 2006). For the Bologna pyxis, see, H. Peirce, *L'art byzantin*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1932), 94, pl. 160–b. For a drawing of the complete frieze see S. Moraw, "Visual Differences: Dionysos in Ancient Art," in *A Different God? Dionysos and Ancient Polytheism*, ed. R. Schlesier (Berlin and New York, 2011), 247–48.

86 J. Dresken-Weiland, *Reliefierte Tischplatten aus theodosianischer Zeit* (Vatican City, 1991), 338–39, fig. 120.

87 Lenzen, *Triumph of Dionysus on Textiles* (n. 64 above).

88 G. Brett, "The Mosaic of the Great Palace in Constantinople," *JWarb* 5 (1942): 35, figs. 7a–c. For a more extensive publication of the mosaics, see G. Brett, M. Gèunter, and R. B. K. Stevenson, *The Great Palace of the Byzantine Emperors: Being a First Report on the Excavations Carried out in Istanbul on Behalf of the Walker Trust (The University of St. Andrews) 1935–1938* (London, 1947); W. Jobst, B. Erdal, and C. Gurtner, *Istanbul, The Great Palace Mosaic: The Story of Its Exploration, Preservation and Exhibition, 1983–1997* (Istanbul, 1997).



FIG. 18 Dionysiac procession from Great Palace Mosaics, Istanbul (photo by author)

it is closely related to the representations on sarcophagi, particularly to the composition of the Triumph Sarcophagus at the Walters Art Gallery.⁸⁹

Another triumph scene with a tentative provenance of Constantinople decorates a large silver bowl dated to the fifth to early sixth century, now in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection.⁹⁰ The god appears seated in a panther-drawn chariot and is accompanied by

maenads, satyrs, cupids, Heracles, and Ariadne (fig. 19). Ariadne is depicted twice, once in a chariot drawn by horses accompanied by a Bacchic priest (?) and again with a cupid in a chariot drawn by panthers; this is an unusual version of the triumph imagery. Examples of processions with more than one chariot are known in sarcophagus decoration, which may have been a model for the other two possible Constantinopolitan triumphs. However, there is so far no known triumph sarcophagus from the city. The closest example is a sarcophagus at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, which is dated to the third century and is made of Proconnesian

89 Kondoleon, *Domestic and Divine*, 196.

90 Before its acquisition it was seen and photographed in Izmir and it probably came to Izmir from Tavas, near Denizli in Southwestern Turkey, M. C. Ross, *Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Mediaeval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*, vol. 1, *Metalwork, Ceramics, Glass, Glyptics, Painting* (Washington DC, 1962), 5–7, pls. VI–VII.

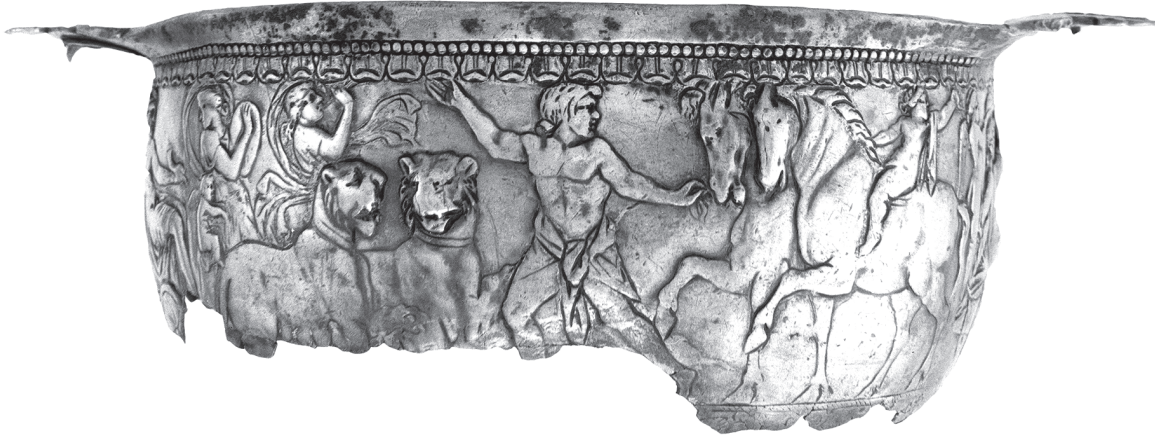


FIG. 19 Dionysos procession, silver bowl (courtesy of Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection)

marble.⁹¹ Here two cupids ride on a pair of elephants that draw Dionysos's chariot. Although it has some parallels to the Great Palace iconography, the sarcophagus is too early to have been used as a model for it and it is unclear whether it comes from Constantinople. It is possible that some late antique mosaic workshops inherited models from Roman workshops that used models excerpted from sarcophagus decoration, but this should remain a suggestion given the many uncertainties.

Considering the small number of examples of the triumph of Dionysos known from late antiquity, the three possible examples from Constantinople—the Psamatia and Great Palace mosaics, and the Dumbarton Oaks bowl—constitute a particularly large concentration of the subject at one center, excepting the group of textile roundels from Egypt and the mosaics from Spain. This may tentatively be taken as a sign of a special interest in the subject in the city in this period. If it is not serendipitous, the popularity of Dionysiac themes is evident in Constantinopolitan mosaics from this period, as they appear in three of the four known figural mosaic groups.⁹²

91 Image available at <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/sarcophagus-with-triumph-of-dionysos-151242>, accessed 15 July 2015.

92 In addition to the Psamatia and the Great Palace mosaics, images of a maenad and a satyr appear in a partly preserved floor in the Saraçhane group, dated to the mid-fourth to mid-fifth century; Ö. Dalgıç, "Early Floor Mosaics in Istanbul," in *Mosaics of Anatolia*, ed. G. Sözen (Istanbul, 2011), 107–10, fig. 8.

The circular composition of the Psamatia mosaic is rare in depictions of the triumph of Dionysos. In the late antique examples mentioned above, which range in date from the fourth to the sixth century and have a wide geographic distribution, the procession moves in a frieze and the god is part of the cortege. Iconographic details such as the kind of animals drawing the god's chariot, the members of the cortege, the god's pose, and the mood of the thiasos vary, and some depict specific moments from Dionysos's Indian campaign while others lack any references to it, but the procession is invariably depicted in a linear format.⁹³ In a number of examples the scene is divided into compartments, with the god in his chariot usually appearing as the central figure and the individual members of the thiasos occupying the other compartments (fig. 15).⁹⁴

A format similar to that of the Psamatia triumph—a centralized composition comprising two concentric circles inside a square—appears in two other

93 In mosaics, the cortege varies from long and crowded with the god, his followers, and sometimes Indian captives, to a short one with Dionysos alone in his chariot. It can occupy a long frieze or a square or, occasionally, circular composition. The last is found in six mosaics, three in North Africa, one in Sabratha, and two in el-Djem (Dunbabin, "Triumph of Dionysus" [n. 64 above], 53, pls. XIVa–b and XVa); two in Spain, in Ecija (Sevilla) and Alcolea (Córdoba) (López Monteagudo, "Sobre una particular iconografía" [n. 67 above], 191–94 and 200, pls. 1 and 16); and one in Sarsina, Italy (Gentili, *Sarsina* [n. 74 above], 56, pl. 20).

94 For example in the el-Djem (Sfax), Sarsina, Ecija (Córdoba), and Ecija (Sevilla) triumphs. See n. 74 above.

roughly contemporary mosaics in Constantinople: Saraçhane and Vilayet. The former is figural but badly preserved: the central circle is completely missing and the outer circle is divided into four wedges, of which only two are extant, containing scenes of a banquet and a hoop game. Busts representing the seasons fill the corners.⁹⁵ The subject of this mosaic is uncertain, but it is not mythological. In the Vilayet mosaic, geometric patterns fill the circles and four *kantharoi* occupy the corners.⁹⁶ In other parts of the Roman world, the concentric design was a well-known formula, consistently used in mosaics for the representation of subjects such as the calendar, zodiac, and Orpheus.⁹⁷

The Psamatia mosaic appears to be a fresh and original rendering of the rare subject of the triumph of Dionysos in late antiquity. The artist, possibly inspired by the *Dionysiaka*, reinterpreted the iconography of the god's triumphal return from India as a victorious ascension, adapting it to a format that was frequently used in the Constantinopolitan workshops. Concentric circles often functioned as a way of separating a god or another important figure from his subjects, and it is likely that at Psamatia the two circles are used to symbolize the different realms to which the figures belong. We will see that these innovations well suited the space and function of the room the mosaic decorated.

The Psamatia Mosaic in a Late Antique Domestic Context

Changing Dining Habits in Late Antiquity

In late antiquity, large apsidal halls like the one the Psamatia mosaic decorated became one of the most common features of domestic architecture.⁹⁸ In the traditional Roman triclinium, couches were set in a U shape around three sides of a rectangular room, leaving little space in the central decorated square, which was covered by a small communal table. The entertainment was not elaborate. It usually included recitation with a bit of music and very few dancers. According to Katherine Dunbabin the plan was essentially “inward-looking, designed to bring the diners together in close proximity around the communal table.” Dunbabin suggests that behind the phenomenon of larger apsidal halls was something more far-reaching than just changing fashions in dining, arguing that the privatization of culture led to the growing importance of previously external spectacle to the dinner and the following drinking party. Traditionally in the Roman Empire, music, singing, and dance had been part of the dinner entertainment for the wealthy, while more elaborate entertainment, including dramatic performances, belonged to the religious and communal festivals of the public sphere. As entertainment for the upper classes became more and more private, dramatic performances steadily moved into the comfort of the home. Mosaics became the stage for performances of the myths in private theaters in the homes of the wealthy, often as part of dinner party entertainment.⁹⁹ And as domestic entertainments became more extravagant and sophisticated, the size of the dining space increased.¹⁰⁰ It became more and more common for large dining halls to contain a sigma-shaped couch in an alcove or apse, leaving the main part of the room open for service and entertainment. The well-preserved pavement of the triclinium of the villa at Argos and

95 Dalgıç, “Mosaics of Constantinople” (n. 3 above), 27, fig. 32.

96 Harrison and Lawson, “Vilayet” (n. 14 above), 76–78.

97 There are examples of zodiac mosaics from Greece and Turkey. For examples in Sparta and Thessalonike (fourth, fifth, and sixth century), see R. Jacoby, “The Four Seasons in Zodiac Mosaics: The Tallaras Baths in Astypalaea, Greece,” *IEJ* 15 (2001): 225–30; P. Asimakopoulou-Atzaka, “Υψηλότερά δάπεδα της Θεσσαλονίκης: Ευρήματα πρόσφατων ανασκαφικών ερευνών (1998–2005),” *Το αρχαιολογικό έργο στη Μακεδονία και τη Θράκη* 20 (2006): 418–19, figs. 16–17. Another zodiac mosaic is found in Bursa in Bythnia; see Okcu, “Prusia Ad Olympum Mozaikleri” (n. 45 above). For calendar mosaics from the second to sixth century, see Åkerström-Hougen, *Villa Falconer* (n. 8 above), 126–27. For zodiac mosaics in synagogues see n. 66 above. Orpheus mosaics in a similar format are common in Britain; see D. J. Smith, “Orpheus Mosaics in Britain,” in *Mosaïque: Recueil d’hommages à Henri Stern*, ed. C. Balmelle and R. Ginouvès (Paris, 1983), 315–28. Apart from these themes, there are also isolated and much earlier instances where mythological scenes are set in the same tripartite scheme, such as the Cassiopeia mosaic from Palmyra (third century), and the Leandros mosaic from North Africa (second century). For the Cassiopeia mosaic, see H. Stern, *Les mosaïques des maisons d’Achille et de Cassiopeia à Palmyre* (Paris, 1977). For the Leandros mosaic, see A. Khader, E. de Balanda and A. Uribe Echeverría, *Image de pierre: La Tunisie en mosaïque* (Paris, 2002), 312.

98 Dunbabin, “Convivial Spaces” (n. 36 above), 74. The stibadium was used already for indoor dining in the late second to early third century but it became more popular in this period; see eadem, “Triclinium and Stibadium” (n. 36 above), 131–32. For the stibadium in late antique villas, see also Rossiter, “Convivium and Villa” (n. 63 above), 202–6.

99 Rossiter, “Convivium and Villa,” 203.

100 Ibid., 203; Dunbabin, “Convivial Spaces,” 78–79; Ellis, “Power, Architecture and Decor” (n. 36 above), 120–23.

the miniature of pharaoh's feast in the sixth-century Vienna Genesis both illustrate such an arrangement, with guests on the stibadium, servants in front, and the musicians, with ample room, playing behind them (fig. 7).¹⁰¹

In the Psamatia villa, the extension of the hall with an apse or alcove and the orientation of the Dionysos figure suggest that a sigma couch was inserted into the eastern end of the hall, leaving the rest of the space open (fig. 3). This large central area (at least 8 by 8 meters) contained the panel of Dionysos and his joyous cortege. In this space the late antique homeowner and his guests would have been entertained by actors, musicians, and dancers.¹⁰²

The popularity of Dionysos in art from this period has been linked to his association with Greek language and literary culture and the theater,¹⁰³ which most likely accounts for the frequency with which we encounter Dionysos in late antique dining rooms. Dionysiac imagery often accompanies the representations of popular myths, as in the mosaic from Sheikh Zouède, which includes in two adjacent panels representations of the Hippolytos and Phaedra and the triumph of Dionysos. Similarly, the Dionysiac thiasos mosaic from Sarrin comes from a peristyle decorated with other popular mythological figures, including Heracles in pursuit of Auge, and Europa's abduction by Zeus. The triumph of Dionysos in Neo Paphos was part of a larger mosaic that included scenes from a series of other myths. Bowersock and others have already convincingly demonstrated the relationship between the mythological mosaics of the Near East and the immensely popular mime theater of late antiquity.¹⁰⁴ Chorikios of Gaza

talks about pantomime performances with mythological subjects such as Achilles and Hippolytos, Briseis, and Phaedra; Libanios mentions Heracles, Dionysos, Achilles, Europa, Phaedra, and Hippolytos in a speech he wrote in support of dancers; and Jacob of Serugh speaks of Apollo, Heracles, and the adulteries of goddesses performed by dancers in his homilies against the theater.¹⁰⁵ These are the same popular mythological themes that appear in late antique mosaic floors.¹⁰⁶ It is likely that what we see in floor mosaics are visualizations of the performance of myths by mime and pantomime artists and since Dionysos is the god of theater, Dionysiac imagery is also to be expected in these rooms, either by itself, or accompanying the popular myths performed on the same floors.

An Invitation to Join the Feast

The thiasos, which celebrates drinking and feasting, is particularly apposite to a dining room, and the Psamatia mosaic's iconography, the novel composition of its subject in a circular format, and its vibrant figure style would have complemented and even encouraged the revelries of diners. A passage in Palladios's early fifth-century *Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom* (*Dialogus de vita S. Joannis Chrysostomi*) provides a lively account of an occasion that speaks to the character of these celebrations. He describes a eunuch, Victor, who, "carried theater girls upon his shoulders at satirical drinking parties, his head decked out with ivy, a drinking bowl in his hand, acting the mythical Dionysos as arbiter of libations." Palladios notes with disapproval that "he did this, not before his initiation into the mysteries of Christ, but actually after his baptism."¹⁰⁷ While he does not comment on the

101 Åkerström-Hougen, *Villa Falconer*, 110–17. Dunbabin, *Roman Banquet* (n. 39 above), 169–74, fig. 6; eadem, *Greek and Roman World* (n. 12 above), 221, and "Convivial Spaces," 78–79.

102 For dancers: Macrobius, *Sat.* 2.1.7, 3.14.4, 7.1.16; Ambrose *Ep.* 27.13; Amm. Marc. 14.6.20. For musicians: Jer. *Ep.* 107.8; Amm. Marc. 14.6.18; Claudian *De cons. stil.* 2.141–42. For actors: Olymp. FHG iv fr. 23. Also see Rossiter, "Convivium and Villa," 203, n. 25.

103 Dunbabin, "Domestic Dionysus" (n. 13 above), 207; Leader-Newby, *Silver and Society in Late Antiquity* (n. 61 above), 158.

104 G. W. Bowersock, *Mosaics as History: The Near East from Late Antiquity to Islam* (Cambridge, MA, 2006), 54–63. See also Dunbabin, "Mythology and Theatre" (n. 63 above), 235–48. We are familiar with the idea from earlier Roman mosaics commemorating theatrical pieces, *ibid.*, 227–34. For examples in late antique silver, see Leader-Newby, *Silver and Society in Late Antiquity*, 136.

105 Chorikios of Gaza, *Orationes*, 21(=12).1, p. 248 (Foerster-Richtsteig). Libanios, *Orationes*, 64.67. For Jacob, see C. Moss, "Jacob of Serugh's Homilies on the Spectacles," *Le Museon*, 48 (1935): 87–112. Also see Bowersock, *Mosaic as History*, 33–54; Dunbabin, "Mythology and Theatre," 246; Webb, *Demons and Dancers* (n. 63 above), 83, 161.

106 For other examples in mosaics and silver, see Dunbabin, "Mythology and Theatre," 235–45; Bowersock, *Mosaics as History*, 42–63; Leader-Newby, *Silver and Society in Late Antiquity*, 136.

107 Τὰ θεατρικὰ κοράσια ἐπ' ὤμων βαστάσαντα ἐν σατυρικοῖς συμποσίοις, κισσῶ τὴν κεφαλὴν ἐστεμμένον καὶ κρατῆρα ἐν τῇ χειρὶ ἐνημμένον οἰνοχοῦν ἐν προσήματι τοῦ μυθικοῦ Διονύσου. ταῦτα δὲ πάντα ἔπραξεν οὐ πρὸ τῆς εἰς Χριστὸν μυσταγωγίας, ἀλλὰ μετὰ τὸ φῶτισμα, P. R. Coleman-Norton, ed., *Palladii dialogus de vita S. Joannis Chrysostomi* (Cambridge, MA, 1928), 4.2.4.

decoration of the space, he describes the symposium as filled with Dionysiac imagery—an ivy wreath, drinking bowls, and dalliances with actresses.¹⁰⁸ The passage also illustrates how the patron and guests joined the musicians and dancers in the revelries.

The Psamatia mosaic would have energized the space and drawn viewers into the myth represented on the floor as they ate and drank. Dionysos and his thiasos were in the open area in front of a stibadium (or three *stibadia* if the room was a triconch), in the middle of the dining room. While the realm of the mosaic began at the western entrance, this vantage point offered only an oblique view of the entire composition. Nor could the mosaic be fully viewed by the diners, who would have had access only to the figures facing their side. Thus the mosaic invited the beholder to stand up and circle it, experiencing it kinesthetically.¹⁰⁹ Moving from the dancing maenads and musicians to old Silenos and the satyrs and the Bacchic child, the beholder would have circled the triumphant god with the revelers and the boundaries between life and myth would have blurred as the pavement's epic images and complex designs became a stage for action.¹¹⁰

While the thiasos is designed as if taking place in the same plane on which a viewer stood, the ascending god in the center of the floor is depicted from above and in a bird's-eye view and modeled to suggest he is moving against the picture plane while ascending. The circular wreath in which he ascends would have echoed the dome above, while the thiasos figures seemed to move across the floor, blurring the line between actual

space and depicted space, and between the mythic and cultic realms and the realm of the everyday.¹¹¹ These realms were further blurred by other details: while the thiasos represents either a mythic or cultic procession, the presence of the human musician, the decidedly human, non-grotesque satyrs, the absence of both the god himself and Pan in the cortege, and the lack of cultic objects and symbols relate it to the experience of a dinner party with dancers and musicians. Thus, the thiasos mosaic would have provided appropriate and resonant mythological echoes for the entertainment held in the dining room, perhaps even lifting it into the realm of a mythological reenactment of a Dionysiac thiasos. Rather than being a static image of procession, it is an inducement to participation that uses the beholder's movement to activate a journey between two realms.¹¹² This journey in a way echoes the spiritual journey to the realm of Dionysos achieved by the frantic revels of the cultic rituals.

The vigorous figure style at Psamatia, one of the mosaic's most striking features, enhances the intrinsic nature of mosaic to prompt movement. The agitated figures dance in wild ecstasy with extraordinary gestures and fluttering garments (figs. 1, 5b–c). This figure style is also found in the Sarrin and Argos thiasoi and the Sinai triumph mosaics (figs. 7–8).¹¹³ Even though these three examples are characterized by a lack of plasticity and incorrect proportions, and though their execution is less skillful than that of the Psamatia mosaic, a similar effect is achieved through the use of lively gestures, contorted bodies, and flying garments.

The dynamism of the figure style in these mosaics is most obvious in comparison to mosaics from the Roman imperial period. Despite the superior technical competency and closer adherence to classical forms in the imperial mosaics, their lack of vigor dramatically distinguishes them from late antique examples. The atmosphere of Roman thiasos mosaics is calm and

108 For the purportedly loose sexual morals of the performers see Webb, *Demons and Dancers*, 49–50.

109 It is the nature of floor decoration to be appreciated in an ambulatory view, a point brilliantly illustrated by Rebecca Molholt with regard to labyrinth mosaics in Roman baths; see "Roman Labyrinth Mosaics and the Experience of Motion," *ArtB* 93, no. 3 (2011): 287–303, 287.

110 Molholt suggests the pavements were deliberately designed to blur the boundaries between life and myth. The depiction of certain moments of myths in order to motivate links with daily life, thus assimilating beholders with the myths, is a theme investigated by Zanker and Ewald, *Living with Myths* (n. 37 above). For a discussion of a relation between myth and a society's historical, religious, and cultural context with references to mosaics in North Africa and Spain, see S. Muth, *Erleben von Raum-Leben im Raum: Zur Funktion mythologischer Mosaikbilder in der römisch-kaiserzeitlichen Wohnarchitektur* (Heidelberg, 1998), 27–47.

111 Here I am applying to the Psamatia mosaic Molholt's interpretation of labyrinth mosaics; see Molholt, "Roman Labyrinth Mosaics," 289.

112 Ibid., 298.

113 For the Sarrin thiasos, see Balty, *La mosaïque de Sarrin*; for the Argos thiasos see Åkerström-Hougen, *Villa Falconer* (n. 8 above); for the Sinai triumph, see Ovadia, De Silva, and Mucznik, "Mosaic Pavements" (n. 13 above). For another dancing maenad and satyr panel from Madaba, see Bowersock, *Mosaics as History*, fig. 1.2.

serene and the poses are formulaic, perhaps because they were copied from stock images.¹¹⁴ Especially striking are the maenads who play music, dance, or walk with the Bacchic cortege. They move with tiny steps and make minimal gestures; at most, a garment flies over the head. A controlled ecstasy and lack of energy characterize other figures as well (fig. 14).¹¹⁵

The later examples, in contrast, are full of movement. The maenads are particularly unrestrained (figs. 1, 5b–c, and 6–9). Their bodies are contorted, the lower part jumping forward while the upper body turns back with a sharp twist of the waist. They raise their arms above their heads, playing castanets and cymbals, dancing in wild ecstasy. Their energy propels the cortege. The dynamism of figures in thiasos scenes is striking even in comparison to figures from other scenes in the same mosaics. In Argos and Sarrin, for example, there is considerably less vigor in the scenes of falconry and lion hunting (Argos), or in those of hunting, the Rape of Europa, Heracles and Auge, Meleager and Atalanta, and a marine Aphrodite (Sarrin), despite the dramatic potential of these subjects.

The depictions of Dionysiac celebrations in these late antique mosaics no longer seem to be derived from the stock images of the imperial age and the lively and agitated figures signal a renewed interest in the subject. It can be argued that in comparison to earlier Roman examples, figures are more animated in late antique mosaics in general. Yet there seems to be a particular emphasis on the exaggerated movements of the dancers in late antique thiasoi, and this may be linked to the changing modes of dining and entertainment that took place in the room they decorated.¹¹⁶

The expressiveness of the large figures in the center of the Psamatia dining hall also would have created

a kinesthetic response in the viewer.¹¹⁷ According to dance scholar John J. Martin, a viewer witnessing a dancing body feels equivalent kinesthetic sensations. This process, which he calls “inner mimicry,” is grounded in a fundamental physical reactivity to events, such as puckering when we witness someone tasting a lemon, or yawning when we see someone yawn.¹¹⁸ Objects, such as architectural masses, can have a similar effect.¹¹⁹ There is strong neurophysiological support for Martin’s theory.¹²⁰ Scientists describe the mutuality of observing and acting as a kind of resonance, explained by the mirror neurons located in several areas of the cortex.¹²¹ These neurons fire both when the subject performs an action, and when the subject sees the action being performed, so that as we watch someone moving, motor circuits in the brain are activated.¹²² Speculating on the evolutionary implications of mirror-neuron activity, Vittorio Gallese, a scholar of human physiology, argues that even though none of this neuromuscular activity registers on a conscious level, the kinesthetic simulation of others’ actions establishes an empathetic connection among those who recognize in those actions an equivalent intention, and as a consequence it encourages social bonding.¹²³ An image as expressive as the one in Psamatia may well have had a similar effect, inviting the guests to join the joyful cortege of Dionysos to dance, drink, and forget their cares.

117 For the contagious nature of the dancer’s movements and the reactions of pantomime audiences see Webb, *Demons and Dancers*, 87–94.

118 J. J. Martin, *Introduction to the Dance* (New York, 1939), 47–52. See also S. L. Foster, “Movement’s Contagion: The Kinesthetic Impact of Performance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Performance Studies*, ed. T. C. Davis (New York, 2008), 48.

119 “Since we respond muscularly to the strains in architectural masses and the attitudes of rocks, it is plain to be seen that we will respond even more vigorously to the action of a body exactly like our own,” Martin, *Introduction to the Dance*, 53. See also Foster, “Movement’s Contagion,” 49.

120 Foster, “Movement’s Contagion,” 54.

121 G. Rizzolatti, et al., “From Mirror Neurons to Imitation: Facts and Speculations,” in *The Imitative Mind*, ed. A. N. Meltzoff and W. Prinz (Cambridge, 2002), 253. See also Foster, “Movement’s Contagion,” 54.

122 Foster, “Movement’s Contagion,” 54.

123 V. Gallese, “The Shared Manifold Hypothesis,” *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 8 (2001): 38–39.

114 Kondoleon suggested that the types were more fully developed on the sarcophagi and were transferred onto mosaics in the form of cartoons; *Domestic and Divine* (n. 37 above), 191–221, esp. 209 and 220–21. Matz connects both sarcophagus and mosaic decorations to a common prototype; *Die Dionysischen Sarkophage* (n. 64 above), 2:226. For Dunbabin’s comment on the latter, see “Triumph of Dionysus,” 61–65.

115 For the Greek and Roman dancing maenad reliefs, ranging in date from the late Hellenistic period to the early third century CE, see Touchette, *Dancing Maenad Reliefs* (n. 58 above).

116 Dunbabin, “Convivial Spaces” (n. 36 above), 68–70.

The Psamatia Mosaic in a Christian Context

On the Psamatia floor the triumphant Dionysos ascends to heaven to join his father after his Indian campaign while a cortege of earthly followers celebrates the pleasures of life by drinking and dancing in a reenactment of a Dionysiac thiasos. This unusual representation brings to mind one of the most cited passages from the *Dionysiaka*, a forty-eight book epic poem written in the fifth century by Nonnos of Panopolis, a Christian, who has been identified as Bishop Nonnos of Edessa.¹²⁴ It is the longest surviving poem from late antiquity and the text is full of allusions to the Christian salvation story. I believe that Nonnos's *Dionysiaka* may actually have inspired the triumph of Dionysos imagery in the Psamatia mosaic. While there is no direct reference to it in Constantinopolitan sources, Nonnos was the undisputed master of Greek poetry in the fifth century,¹²⁵ and there are reasons to believe that he was well known and his poems well read in the elite circles of Constantinople.¹²⁶ Egyptian poetry traveled far and wide through the movement of authors and their compositions and the *Dionysiaka* was extremely popular in the late antique Mediterranean.¹²⁷ An inscription

124 E. Livrea, "Il poeta e il vescovo: La questione Nonniana e la storia," *Prometheus* 13 (1987): 97–123. This identification is rejected by Al. Cameron, "The Poet, the Bishop, and the Harlot," *GRBS* 41 (2001): 182–88. For a response, see E. Livrea, "The Nonnos Question Revisited," in *Des géants à Dionysos: Mélanges de mythologie et de poésie grecques offerts à Francis Vian*, ed. D. Accorinti and P. Chuvin (Alexandria, 2003), 447–55.

125 A. Gianfranco, "Greek Poetry," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. S. F. Johnson (New York, 2012), 367.

126 The innovative character of his metrics and style, usually called the "Nonnian style," was imitated by a group of poets that included Cyrus of Panopolis, the Prefect of Constantinople in 439, and Pamprepios of Panopolis, who was in Constantinople in 476, held a public chair of Greek, and became a quaestor and then consul in 479; see L. Migúelez Cavero, *Poems in Context: Greek Poetry in the Egyptian Thebaid 200–600 AD* (Berlin and New York, 2008), 29–31 and 83–85. Also see Al. Cameron, "The Empress and the Poet," *YCS* 27 (1982): 239. Nonnos was from Panopolis but he likely composed the *Dionysiaka* in Alexandria; the sixth-century poet Agathias of Myrina, in western Asia Minor, studied in Alexandria, lived in Constantinople, and quotes Nonnos, who obviously had an important influence on him.

127 For other poets and their works known outside of Egypt and a discussion of the dissemination of Egyptian poetry, see Migúelez Cavero, *Poems in Context*, 101–2. For popularity of Nonnos outside of Egypt, see R. Shorrock, *The Challenge of Epic: Allusive Engagement in the Dionysiaca of Nonnos* (Leiden and Boston, 2001), 1–2.

on a villa mosaic in Halikarnassos, for example, has been offered as a testimony of the popularity of the *Dionysiaka* in Asia Minor because of the close stylistic connections of the mosaic's epigram with the poem.¹²⁸ The *Dionysiaka* may even have been accompanied by a corpus of associated Dionysos imagery, as it was in Egypt.¹²⁹

One of the *Dionysiaka*'s most famous passages is particularly evocative of the Psamatia mosaic. The poem's main subject is the life of Dionysos, including his expedition to India, his introduction of wine to mankind to relieve sorrow, his triumphant return to the west, and finally his ascension to heaven to take his

128 Βῆμα τεὸν φέρε δεῦρο, μολὼν δ' ἐπὶ[νευε] φαεινοῖς αὐτίκα νῦν βλεφάροις ψη[φ]οθετὸν παρέχω σῶμα λίθων πολύμορφον, ὅπερ τεχνήμονες ἄνδρες στορνυμένου δαπέδου πάντοθεν ἡγλάϊσαν, ὄφρα κεν ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα δόμου πολυδαίδαλον εἶδος, ὑψορόφου πάτρῃ τῇδ' ὀνομαστὸν ἔη, ὁ πρὶν αἰκέλιον τέλεθον Χαρίδημ[ος] ἔ]γειρεν ἐκ γαίης καμάτοις, χρήματα πλῖστα πορῶν.

Most of the words of the mosaic epigram are common in the *Dionysiaka* and they are often in the same position. Additionally, Nonnos's prosody follows strict rules that are also observed in the mosaic epigram; see S. Isager, "The Late Roman Villa in Halikarnassos: The Inscriptions," in *Patron and Pavements in Late Antiquity*, ed. B. Poulsen and S. Isager (Odense, Denmark, 1997), 25–26.

129 The *Dionysiaka* has been suggested as an influence for the frontal triumph scenes on textiles interpreted as depicting the god's ascension; Lenzen, *Triumph of Dionysus on Textiles* (n. 64 above). Outside of Egypt, the *Dionysiaka* has also been proposed as a source for the ivory pyxides in New York and Bologna; C. Augé, "Dionysos (in Peripheria Orientali)" (n. 74 above), 3526, no. 125 and 126, and M. Pilar San Nicolas Pedraz, "Iconografía de Dioniso y los Indios en la musivaria Romana: Origen y pervivencia," in *Antigüedad y Cristianismo XI (= Congreso Internacional sobre la tradición en la antigüedad tardía, Madrid 1993)* (Murcia, 1994), 405–20. For the Lykourgos cup, a fourth-century glass cage cup carved with the scene of Ambrosia in the form of a vine killing king Lykourgos, see J. Elsner, "The Lycurgus Cup," in *New Light on Old Glass: Recent Research on Byzantine Mosaics and Glass*, ed. C. Entwistle and L. James (London, 2013), 103–11. For the cosmological mosaic of Merida, see J. Arce, "El mosaico cosmológico de Augusta Emerita y las *Dionysiaca* de Nonno de Panópolis (300–580 d.C.)," in *Mérida Tardorromana* (Merida, 2002), 117–35. While the Egyptian corpus certainly exhibits parochialism, we should not dismiss the possibility that it is not exceptional; Egypt's unique climatic and environmental conditions allow for the preservation of material culture unheard of elsewhere, especially textiles, ivory and wood. The same has been recently argued for the literary panorama of late antique Egypt; see Migúelez Cavero, *Poems in Context*, 99.

seat next to Zeus, his father, in Olympos.¹³⁰ In book seven, Aion appeals to Zeus to relieve the pains of mortals, and Zeus replies:

I will give mankind, to heal their sorrows, delicious wine . . . My son, bringer of that glorious gift, shall plant in the earth the most fragrant fruit of vintage that takes away grief, my son the joyous Dionysos . . . All in wild jubilation will cry out over the echoing tables with mutual toasts, in honor of Dionysos, protector of the human race. This my son, after his struggle on earth . . . after the Indian war, will be received by the bright heaven to shine beside Zeus.¹³¹

In short, a supreme god will send his son to heal the pains of mankind, and after his labor on earth, he will ascend to heaven. The passage is often interpreted as alluding to the ascension of Christ. Is it possible that the Psamatia mosaic does as well? The composition certainly bears a strong likeness to contemporary representations of Christ in dome decorations, such as the rotunda at Thessalonike, where Christ ascends to heaven in the center of a wreath, surrounded by a circle of followers.¹³²

The *Dionysiaka* has been the subject of continuous and lively literary, theological, and historical debate and the degree to which, or whether, it is Christianizing is contested. Glen Bowersock interprets it as proof of the continued popularity of Dionysos in the increasingly Christian world of late antiquity, using the poem and contemporaneous imagery to elucidate the mechanics of the construction of a polytheist god of salvation who presented an alternative and rival to Christ in response to contemporary Christian doctrine and iconography.¹³³ Others reject the notion of Dionysos as

a rival or a prefiguration of Christ, instead viewing the *Dionysiaka* as one of many examples of the continuity of classical literature in early Christianity.¹³⁴ Standing somewhere in the middle, Wolfgang Liebeschuetz acknowledges the parallels between Dionysos and Christ, but he also proposes that the *Dionysiaka* is an essentially nonreligious tribute to ancient literature, culture, and education, with a tone that “is good-naturedly humorous, rather than profound” and that the famous passage quoted above “is to be read neither as an allegory for the coming of Christ, nor as the exposition of a Christianized theology of Dionysos.” Nonnos, he argues, “is rather writing in a spirit of fun, enjoying the paradox of the comparison.”¹³⁵

Libeschuetz’s approach to the *Dionysiaka* offers a useful model for understanding how the Psamatia mosaic might have functioned in a Christian context. This would acknowledge its allusions to Christian mythology, but also emphasize the mosaic’s essentially nonreligious character. There is plentiful evidence for a deep interest in classical myths among the Greek-speaking Christians of late antiquity. Dionysiac myths were the most popular, but a wide range of mythological images survives in mosaics, sculpture, and in other luxury objects,¹³⁶ and in some cases it is clear that they came from Christian houses. For example, the famous fourth-century Abegg Stiftung Dionysos hanging,

the wider thematic concerns of Christian late antiquity.” Although he does not claim that Nonnos shaped the character of Dionysos to resemble that of Christ or vice versa, to him Nonnos’s Dionysos in many respects appears to be a perverse, provocative anti-Christ; see R. Shorrock, *The Myth of Paganism* (London, 2011), 115–17.

134 Alan Cameron does not see any meaningful relationship between the text and the context, and argues that nowhere in the *Dionysiaka* is Dionysos portrayed as a savior or redeemer; see *The Last Pagans of Rome* (Oxford and New York, 2011), 700–706. Francis Vian sees Nonnos’s Dionysos as a literary creation similar to Homer’s Odysseus; *Nonnos de Panopolis: Les Dionysiaques*, vol. 1, *Chants I–II* (Paris, 1976), 94–95.

135 W. Liebeschuetz, “Pagan Mythology in the Christian Empire,” *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 2, no. 2 (1995): 206–8.

136 For examples on silver, see Leader-Newby, *Silver and Society in Late Antiquity* (n. 61 above); on textiles, S. Schrenk and R. Knaller, *Textilien des Mittelmeerraumes aus spätantiker bis frühislamischer Zeit* (Riggisberg, 2004); in sculpture, L. M. Stirling, *The Learned Collector: Mythological Statuettes and Classical Taste in Late Antique Gaul* (Ann Arbor, 2005). For a general survey of Dionysiac imagery in late antique dining rooms, see Parrish, “Dionysus and His Circle” (n. 37 above).

130 *Dionysiaka*, ed. W. H. D. Rouse, H. J. Rose, and L. R. Lind (Cambridge, MA, 1940). For suggested dates and bibliography, see Miguélez Caverio, *Poems in Context*, 17–18.

131 *Dionysiaka* 7.73–105.

132 C. Bakirtzis and A. Doumas, *Mosaics of Thessaloniki: 4th to 14th century* (Athens, 2012), 112–14, fig. 72.

133 Bowersock, “Dionysus as an Epic Hero” (n. 75 above), 110–20, esp. 117, and idem, “Dionysus and His World,” (n. 61 above), 41–44. Most recently, Robert Shorrock emphasized the parallels between the narratives of Dionysos and Christ as presented by Nonnos in both the *Paraphrase* and *Dionysiaka*. He argued that in Nonnos’s Dionysos there is a strong “overlap, congruence and parallelism with Christ and

which has a series of Dionysiac figures, including the god himself, was found together with a few scraps of textile depicting episodes from the New Testament.¹³⁷ The owner of the Mildenhall treasure (fourth century, found in West Suffolk in England), too, was apparently a wealthy Christian, since his collection included three silver spoons bearing the chi-rho symbol; it also contained three silver dishes engraved with Oceanos, Nereids, and tritons as well as Dionysos and his thiasos.¹³⁸ The famous Projecta casket (fourth century) is richly decorated with grapevines and figures, including a bathing Aphrodite; the inscription identifies its owner as a Christian.¹³⁹ The Dumbarton Oaks marriage belt bearing both Dionysiac and Christian imagery, possibly from Constantinople (late sixth to seventh century), is a later example of the same phenomenon.¹⁴⁰ According to Lea Stirling, among the statuettes of pagan gods and goddesses that decorated the houses of the Christian elite, Dionysos (the entire cycle), Venus (especially with marine attributes), and Diana (hunting) were the most popular.¹⁴¹ While material evidence is scant for Constantinople, textual accounts suggest that pagan imagery was used extensively in the decora-

tion of private and public monuments.¹⁴² One concerns Marina, a granddaughter of Theodosios I and a pious Christian, who apparently decorated her private baths in Constantinople with statuary and mosaics with mythological scenes.¹⁴³ Sarah Bassett has argued that the display of mythological sculptures emphasized their high aesthetic merit, while at the same time exposing their lack of credibility as religious items.

Recent scholarship has emphasized that *paideia*, the traditional Greek education in grammar, rhetoric, and the literature, history, and mythology of classical Greece, offers a key to understanding of the meaning of these late antique mythological artifacts,¹⁴⁴ and that they proliferated in the domestic sphere as an expression of their elite owners' cultural values, rather than their religious affiliation.¹⁴⁵ The classics-based curriculum cultivated interest in mythology, and in such a climate it is not surprising to find elites commissioning new works with mythological subjects. The *Dionysiaka* itself was a product of a culture in which poetry was an important part of a classical education and appreciation of it a sign of belonging to an exclusive group.¹⁴⁶ Similarly the Psamatia mosaic is a witness to the continuing popularity of ancient literature, culture, and education in late antiquity and the contemporaneity and freshness of the Dionysiac theme in the late fifth century in Constantinople.

137 Since the textile presumably came from a tomb, the additions are probably from the time of the burial, suggesting that the Christian owner was buried wrapped in the Dionysos hanging and that he used the tapestry in his house before his death. See Schrenk and Knaller, *Textilien des Mittelmeerraumes*, 185–89. D. Willers et al., *Der Dionysos-Behang der Abegg-Stiftung = La tenture de Dionysos de la Fondation Abegg* (Riggisberg, 1987); Rutschowskaya, *Tissus coptes* (n. 57 above), 86. For an alternative interpretation of the hanging as evidence of the strength of the cult of Dionysos, see Bowersock, "Dionysus and His World," 52–53.

138 For the Mildenhall Treasure, see Leader-Newby, *Silver and Society in Late Antiquity*, 144, and K. S. Painter, *The Mildenhall Treasure: Roman Silver from East Anglia* (London, 1977). For an extensive catalogue of late antique silver, see J. M. C. Toynbee and K. S. Painter, *Silver Picture Plates of Late Antiquity: AD 300 to 700* (London, 1986).

139 Maguire, "Good Life" (n. 44 above), 246.

140 M. C. Ross, S. R. Zwirn, and S. A. Boyd, *Catalogue of the Byzantine and Early Mediaeval Antiquities in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection*, vol. 2, *Jewelry, Enamels, and Art of the Migration Period* (Washington, DC, 2005), 37–38, cat. no. 38.

141 She suggests that they reflect the common interests of the aristocracy across the empire: the "good life" and leisure in the Dionysiac imagery, hunting and enjoyment of nature in the imagery of Diana, and ideal beauty in the imagery of Venus; Stirling, *Learned Collector*, 220. For the display of mythological statuette in Christian houses in Rome and other parts of the empire, see *ibid.*, 167.

142 These have been thoroughly studied by Sarah Bassett in *The Urban Image of Late Antique Constantinople* (Cambridge and New York, 2004).

143 C. Mango, "The Palace of Marina, the Poet Palladas and the Bath of Leo VI," in *Ευφρόσυνον: Αφιέρωμα στον Μανώλη Χατζηδάκη*, vol. 1 (Athens, 1991).

144 For example, J. Elsner, "Paideia: Ancient Concept and Modern Reception," *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 20, no. 4 (2013): 136; Leader-Newby, *Silver and Society in Late Antiquity*, 124; Stirling, *Learned Collector*, 228–32. For Hellenism specifically in the fifth century, see A. Kaldellis, *Hellenism in Byzantium: The Transformations of Greek Identity and the Reception of the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge and New York, 2007), 173–87; he describes the culture of the fifth and the sixth century as "Christian classical culture."

145 Peter Brown has amply demonstrated that classical language and ideas were expected in certain contexts and that no aristocrat could forgo this essential marker of status, with its coded language understandable only to those with similar training; *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity: Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison, WI, 1992).

146 Miguélez Caverio, *Poems in Context* (n. 127 above), 372.

The triumph of Dionysos was a particularly apt subject for the decoration of a dining room because of the theatrical performances that took place there. And while these were strenuously condemned by some church fathers, they were also accepted within Christian culture. Bowersock cites the Christian apologist Chorikios of Gaza's objection to the idea that watching adultery on the stage was corrupting: "Since the whole affair is a kind of playfulness, its objective is song and laughter. Everything is contrived for spiritual refreshment and relaxation. It seems to me that Dionysos, who is, after all, a laughter-loving god, has taken pity on our nature. . . . and provides an opportunity for diversion in order to console those who are dispirited. . . . The god is generous and well disposed to humanity, so as to provoke laughter of every kind."¹⁴⁷ The centrality of Dionysos in Chorikios's apology for theater fits well with the use of a Dionysiac frame for the representation of myths in mosaics,¹⁴⁸ or the appearance of Dionysiac imagery in the center of a mosaic on which myths would be performed. Moreover, the Dionysos of Nonnos and of Chorikios are strikingly similar. Both gave relief to mankind for their sorrows, the former through wine, the latter through the theater. And since neither Nonnos nor Chorikios, both Christians, was troubled by describing Dionysos as a generous and triumphant god, why would this trouble the Christian patron of the Psamatia mosaic?

We do not know if people ever recited the *Dionysiaka* in late antique dining halls, but one wonders if Nonnos had such venues in mind when he wrote "All in wild jubilation cry out over the echoing tables with mutual toasts, in honor of Dionysos."¹⁴⁹ The "spirit of fun and humor" of the Psamatia mosaic certainly reflects the mood of Nonnos's writing.¹⁵⁰ The triclinium floor could have served as a stage where the patron of the house displayed his aspirations to his guests, a venue for

self-definition and mutual validation.¹⁵¹ Perhaps the patron of the mosaic and the mime performance was also the patron of the wine for the evening. Perhaps he appeared to his guests in the guise of Dionysos, crowned with ivy and holding a drinking bowl in his hand, surrounded by musicians and actors. Perhaps he stood on the mosaic, surrounded by an ecstatic crowd, and offered toasts in honor of Dionysos, the god who ascends, like Christ, to heaven, similarly surrounded by an ecstatic crowd. Perhaps "enjoying the paradox of the comparison," the Christian patron visualized in this way his own salvation—his eventual ascension to heaven—despite having enjoyed the "good life" condemned by Palladios and others.

The Dionysos mosaic from Psamatia dates to the second half of the fifth century and belonged to an estate in a wealthy suburb of Constantinople along the shores of the Propontis. Monasteries and churches dotted the neighborhood, and the known residents were members of the Christian elite. The mosaic paved the space of a large dining hall that was probably provided with an apse or alcove to accommodate a sigma couch. A large ornamental mosaic panel framed a central image of Dionysos ascending in his panther-drawn chariot encircled by a thiasos of his followers. Four season personifications framed the thiasos, ensuring that the joyful parade continued through endless cycles of time.

With the gradual privatization of entertainment, dinner parties became more elaborate, growing to include drama, choruses, dancers, and musicians, all of which required larger dining rooms. While Dionysiac imagery has always been favored in these spaces, the vibrant and ecstatic figure style of the Psamatia thiasos seems to be a response to these and other changes in dining culture in late antiquity. The nature of a floor mosaic is to invite the viewer to walk on it and thereby enter the world depicted on the floor. In the case of the Psamatia mosaic, the circular format and vigorous style of the thiasos figures were tools to immerse the beholder in the Dionysos myth. In a mimetic relationship with the dancing figures of the joyful cortege, viewers were bonded in the mutual joy and happiness promised by the god.

Several myths very popular in late antique mime and pantomime theaters are often found represented in

147 Chorikios, *Orationes*, 332(=8).31–32, trans. Bowersock, *Mosaics as History*, 62–63.

148 Ibid., 63.

149 *Dionysiaca*, 7.73–105. Performances of epic recitations combined with dramatic enactment of poems are attested in the second century. We know that Homeric epic was still a live entertainment form at least into the third century; G. Nagy, *Poetry as Performance: Homer and Beyond* (Cambridge, 1996), 164–70. Also see Webb, *Demons and Dancers* (n. 63 above), 26–27.

150 Liebeschuetz, "Pagan Mythology" (n. 135 above), 206.

151 Kondoleon, *Domestic and Divine* (n. 37 above), 109.

the mosaics decorating the homes of the wealthy, perhaps to commemorate performances. Dionysiac imagery appears more often than any other mythological imagery on such floors, either alone or as a frame to other myths. The dining room became an increasingly popular venue for theater performances for the late antique elite, who preferred private entertainment to public, and Dionysos, the god of theater, was the most popular theme for decorating that room. Dionysos was the inventor and the distributor of wine and the inspiration for the theater—the two essential elements of the late antique dinner party. What other image would befit this context better than the triumphant Dionysos, who, after relieving mankind's sorrows, ascended to Olympus to join his father Zeus, leaving his followers on earth in joy and happiness, the continuity of which is guaranteed by the circling seasons?

The Dionysos mosaic would have made the triclinium of the Psamatia villa into a social space that enveloped the patron and his guests, bonding them together in the cortege of the god with its motley band of musicians and dancers, and encouraging them to leave behind the judgments and condemnations of Palladios and his kind. The Psamatia mosaic survives as a lively, if damaged, witness of the duality of elite culture in the capital at a time of great transformation.

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